The New Criterion

April 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: April 1995

Lucrum et veritas

They still don't get it. When Lee M. Bass gave Yale University $20 million in 1991 to develop an integrated course of studies in Western civilization, he did not want his money going to support the kind of radical multiculturalism that had become a disfiguring staple at Yale and other American universities in the past couple of decades. When he said "Western civilization" he meant, well, Western civilization. It doesn't seem that complicated. But apparently it was beyond the ken of those presiding over the future of Yale University. It was announced last month that, after watching Yale dither and equivocate about the disposition of his gift for four years, Mr. Bass had lost patience and asked for his money back. Although clearly stunned by what *The Wall Street Journal* rightly called this "extraordinary display of backbone," Yale had no choice but to comply.

The saga of the Bass grant for Western civilization (one of several large grants that the Bass family has made to Yale) is instructive for everyone concerned. For prospective donors, it is a cautionary tale. For recalcitrant university administrators and faculty, it is an object lesson in how not to respond to a major gift. The inspiration for Mr. Bass's visionary gift was the famous speech that Donald Kagan, the eminent classics professor at Yale who was then Dean of Yale College, gave to incoming freshmen in September 1990. Crying out like a voice in the wilderness, Mr. Kagan called upon the students and faculty of Yale to preserve the traditional focus of liberal-arts education. "It is both right and necessary," Mr. Kagan said in that speech, "to place Western civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today." Not only had Western civilization "asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting its power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate," but Western philosophy and religion had also inculcated a habit of self-criticism as well as "a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures."

Mr. Kagan's speech made national headlines. As we reported in these pages at the time, Mr. Kagan's championship of Western civilization sparked angry denunciations from radical elements in the Yale community. The editor of one student newspaper fumed that "taking European culture as the center is not only ridiculous, it is the seed of racism." Mr. Kagan himself was castigated as "intolerant," "paternalistic," "racist." But Lee Bass, who had been graduated from Yale in

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1979, understood the clarion call sounded in Mr. Kagan's speech. When Benno Schmidt, then the president of Yale, approached Mr. Bass about making a contribution to his alma mater, he responded with his extraordinary gift. Built around a multi-disciplinary, double-credit survey course in Western civilization, the Bass grant was intended to support seven senior and four junior professorships. A university committee, which included Mr. Kagan, was set up to design the course of study, which would chart the course of Western civilization from Mesopotamia through World War II.

As *The Wall Street Journal* reported last November, what happened next was a quadrille of academic obfuscation and behind-the-scenes politicking. Donald Kagan left the deanship, Benno Schmidt abandoned Yale to make money, and the university's new president, Richard Levin, announced that there would be no new faculty hired with the Bass money. The committee planning the program in Western civilization disbanded in disarray.

What about that $20 million? Mr. Bass began wondering the same thing. In September 1993, he asked President Levin what progress had been made in instituting the program he had endowed. By November 1994, his impatience was a matter of public record. In an anguished, hand-wringing letter to *The Wall Street Journal* last December, President Levin complained that the *Journal* had got him all wrong, that Western civilization was alive and well at Yale, and that he had rejected the proposed design for the Bass program for the "practical, logistical, and nonpolitical reason that it made inefficient use of our faculty resources." The Bass gift had not been "subverted," Mr. Levin wrote, no matter what critics said. On the contrary, "the income from Mr. Bass's generous gift to our endowment has been and will be spent entirely for the purposes specified by the donor."

Really? To get a sense of what Mr. Levin meant, just consider statements made by Michael Holquist, acting head of the Yale comparative-literature department, who envisioned "fusion" courses that would include "gender studies" and other delicacies on the multiculturalist menu. Literature and history cannot be taught, Mr. Holquist explained, "without reference to O. J. Simpson." So much for the achievements of Western civilization. Such statements cannot have been reassuring to Mr. Bass. Rather than sit by while his gift was used to undermine the very things he had intended to support, he asked the university to allow him to approve faculty appointments made with his money. Not surprisingly, Yale refused. Mr. Bass then asked for his money back.

The responses to the sorry story of the Bass grant have been instructive. President Levin immediately embarked on a campaign of damage control. In the March 31 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he is quoted as saying that the "Bass incident has been over-interpreted"—give a raise to the PR man who came up with that!—and that he thinks it is "an aberration rather than a sign of a new trend." No doubt he fervently hopes so. And then there is his March 23 blandishment "To the Alumni and Alumnae of Yale University," in which he writes that "it is important to emphasize that implementation of the course was not delayed by political opposition to the course's content. The study of Western Civilization has always been and will continue to be at the center of a Yale College education, and our faculty's commitment to the subject remains unshaken." Yes, of course: the *Iliad* and O. J. Simpson. And it is odd, isn't it, that when Donald Kagan said that Yale should focus its energies on Western civilization he was roundly castigated as a reactionary? But then Mr. Kagan was speaking to students, who might be expected to take him seriously, whereas President Levin was merely attempting to smoothe any ruffled feathers

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that might exist among the university's largest pool of potential donors.

Of course, *The New York Times* weighed in with an editorial defending Yale and, by implication, attacking Mr. Bass and his supporters. "No self-respecting educational institution," the *Times* intoned in its best moralistic fashion, "can allow an outsider—no matter how well-meaning or generous—to dictate its education priorities." Donors, the *Times* continued, should learn that "it is probably a bad idea . . . to try to use a gift to influence a school's educational direction," while "universities must also resist the temptation to solicit and accept gifts from donors with a strong political agenda." The lesson to be drawn from the Bass case, the *Times* concluded, is that "it does not pay to pander to a donor's political quirks."

Right. Mr. Bass has a "strong political agenda" and exhibits "political quirks" because he wanted to support a program in Western civilization that was not beholden to the politically correct imperatives of contemporary academic orthodoxy. And what of the multiculturalist radicals who opposed Mr. Bass? Somehow, the *Times* did not get around to objecting to their "strong political agenda" and "political quirks."

And as for self-respecting educational institutions refusing to allow "outsiders" to "dictate education priorities" and "influence educational direction," where was *The New York Times* when we needed it? When Lee Bass makes a gift to help preserve Western civilization against the onslaught of intellectual and moral radicalism, he is attacked for meddling with academic freedom. But what about the activities of such institutions as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation (to name only two of the largest and most influential), which have been blatantly attempting to "dictate" educational priorities and "influence" educational policy for years? In January, Evan Gahr reported on some of their projects in *The Wall Street Journal*. At the University of Washington, a professor who is the project director of several Ford Foundation grants co-edited a volume entitled *Transforming the Curriculum: Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies*, part of an effort to "undo the effects of the distortions set in motion 500 years ago when Columbus brought massacre and the most brutal form of slavery known to these shores, all in the interest of spreading 'Western civilization' with all its long-lasting assumptions of racial, cultural, and male superiority." Or what about the $250,000 fellowship program supported by the Rockefeller Foundation for the City University of New York's Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies? According to Mr. Gahr, that program helped to support "projects on transgender phenomena such as transsexualism or specific cross-gender figures." Or what about the Ford Foundation's multi-million-dollar "Campus Diversity Project," designed to encourage multiculturalism on campuses across the country? Can any more obvious effort to transform educational priorities and "influence" school policies be imagined? Why hasn't *The New York Times* stepped in to criticize these endeavors?

Perhaps even more instructive was Andrew Delbanco's response to the Bass case in a "Comment" for the March 27 issue of *The New Yorker*. Mr. Delbanco, who teaches at Columbia University, understands why Mr. Bass and his supporters should have been upset by what happened to the Bass grant. Unfortunately, he is himself a perfect embodiment of the kind of institutionalized radicalism that the Bass gift was intended to combat. Mr. Delbanco acknowledges that universities have hitherto been places "where the culture in which alumni prospered has been transmitted to their children." At the same time, he insists that

> universities are meant to foster suspicion toward every untested piety and to raise

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> doubts about every axiom. They are, properly, places of experiment and irreverence; they will never please those who expect them to be mainly curatorial. . . . [E]specially now, in the national climate of reaction, universities have an obligation to keep alive the spirit of blasphemy that has always been part of the true life of the mind.

Rhetorically, Mr. Delbanco's gambit here can be very effective. Practically everyone believes that a liberal education, in addition to transmitting a body of knowledge, ought to sharpen a student's critical faculties. Talk of challenging "untested piety" and making universities "places of experiment" go down very well with the liberal populace of middle-class America. But what about the "suspicion" and "irreverence" that Mr. Delbanco mentions? Are they really "properly" part of a liberal-arts education? And is it really the case that the "the spirit of blasphemy" has "always been part of the true life of the mind"? It would have come as a surprise to Plato and Aristotle, to Augustine, to Dante and Milton—indeed to the entire pantheon of great Western thinkers except the handful of radicals who helped create the climate of revolt whose legacy the American university is now struggling with.

Mr. Delbanco, like many others who have rushed in to condemn the Bass gift, would have us believe that the choice facing American higher education is between a mindless conformity and a daring radicalism. In fact, the choice is between the liberal tradition that recognizes the past as the foundation of the present and a rootless intellectual antinomianism. The fate of the Bass grant at Yale rightly worries Mr. Delbanco because it suggests that the "compact between universities and the middle class" in this country is now beginning "to come apart." What neither he nor the editorial writers for *The New York Times* seem to understand, however, is that the way to repair that compact is not by launching additional assaults on the foundations of liberal learning but by making new efforts to recapture the ground that has been lost to the irreverent "spirit of blasphemy" that has dominated the academy in this country since the 1960s. In this sense, the loss of the Bass gift was not only a blow to the finances of Yale University but also a warning shot from the gradually regrouping opposition in the culture wars.

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Getting to know Pissarro

by Hilton Kramer

Pissarro . . . remains the painter for those who look at, rather than for those who read about, painting.
—Walter Sickert, 1923

Only someone who has experienced painting as a world in which it is possible to immerse as well as divert oneself can appreciate the inflections of Pissarro's painting. Shock and immediate effects are sacrificed for the sake of subtleties, passages, modulations, the mediation of contrasts. And little masterpieces are to be found complete in themselves in the dozen or so brushstrokes with which such a detail as a cab is indicated.
—Clement Greenberg, 1944

There are great painters who seem fated to be perpetually rediscovered, and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) is one of them. Everyone with an interest in modern painting knows, or thinks he knows, Pissarro's work, but in the large-scale museum surveys devoted to Impressionist painting it tends to be overlooked. It doesn't lodge itself in the public mind the way certain pictures by his contemporaries do. In the company of Monet, Renoir, and Degas, Pissarro's paintings tend to look modest and understated, even tame. There are no outsize pictures in Pissarro's *oeuvre*, and there are none that boast of what Picasso once described as "the big clash of the cymbals." He had a horror of ostentation, and was a merciless critic of his own work. He could be harsh and astute about the work of others, too—as his wonderful letters to his son Lucien attest. Yet he was so responsive to the strengths of his contemporaries and so determined to test the validity of their discoveries in his painting that he was sometimes in danger of allowing their influence to derail his own artistic course. It was the kind of risk he was willing to take, however, in the interest of enlarging the possibilities of his art. On that matter, Pissarro didn't believe that anyone—himself included—had the last word. Which is why, late in life, when Matisse asked the elderly Pissarro, "What is an Impressionist?", he replied that "an Impressionist is a painter who never paints the same picture, who always paints a new picture." That may constitute a hazardous principle for an artist who lacks an inner core of conviction and experience—in other words, a resolute artistic conscience—but this was never a problem for Pissarro. He was constitutionally incapable of striking a false note.

How often Pissarro succeeded in painting new pictures—and new pictures of astonishing quality—remains, nearly a century after his death, a subject that is still in the process of being revealed to us. The exhibition that was organized in London, Paris, and Boston fifteen years ago to mark the 150th anniversary of the artist's birth seemed so comprehensive that many people must have taken away the impression that they had at last seen Pissarro complete. Yet new studies continued to illuminate aspects of

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the artist's *oeuvre* that were only briefly glimpsed in the 1980 retrospective. Then, in the exhibition called "The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro's Series Paintings," which was organized by Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro in 1992 for museums in Dallas, Philadelphia, and London, we were once again confronted with a Pissarro we hardly knew—the "late" Pissarro whose "series" paintings of urban subjects turned out to be quite as radical and prophetic as anything to be seen in late Monet or late Degas or late Cézanne.

It is worth noting in regard to both the 1980 retrospective and the 1992–93 show of "Series Paintings" that neither of them came to New York. No doubt there were legitimate logistical reasons why no major museum in the art capital of the country found it possible to provide a venue for these important exhibitions, but I frankly doubt that logistical problems are sufficient to explain such a consistent policy of indifference to Pissarro's achievement. In the same period, after all, no New York museum was prepared to take the great Constable retrospective that was organized at the Tate Gallery in London in 1991. This suggests, at the least, that aesthetic quality of the highest order is not a good enough reason for certain of our museums to take the trouble to bring us major exhibitions of a sort that are unlikely to be seen again for a generation or more. And when we think of some of the exhibitions which New York museums have thought it more important to bring us—the Bruce Nauman retrospective, for example—we must also wonder whether this melancholy policy doesn't have something to do with a loss of interest in painting as a high artistic endeavor.

This spring, with the Nauman show occupying an immense amount of space at the Museum of Modern Art, the kitsch-dominated 1995 Biennial Exhibition filling the entire interior of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the likes of Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres dominating the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, there has been ample reason to wonder if painting isn't now in danger of going the way of classical music—in danger, that is, of becoming a form of high culture which our mainstream institutions are in the process of marginalizing in the interest of serving a younger, larger, and less serious public whose tastes are largely determined by our degraded popular culture and its imbecilic mass media.

Given the implications of this melancholy prospect, it has certainly been a stroke of good fortune—for those of us who are still interested in painting, that is—that the Jewish Museum in New York has collaborated in organizing the latest of the great Pissarro exhibitions. New York is indeed the only American venue for "Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator," which has been jointly organized by Joachim Pissarro, the painter's great-grandson, who is now the chief curator of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and Stephanie Rachum, the curator of modern art at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where the exhibition originated last fall.[1] If I read the records correctly, this is the first major Pissarro exhibition to be seen in New York in thirty years—since the loan exhibition at Wildenstein & Company in the spring of 1965.

It is, moreover, an exhibition that significantly expands our understanding of the "new paintings" that Pissarro continued to create until the very last years of his long career. Many of the paintings in this show have rarely been exhibited before, and there are others, which remain in private hands,

1 "Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator," organized by Joachim Pissarro and Stephanie Rachum, opened at the Jewish Museum, New York, on February 26, 1995, and remains on view through July 16. It was shown at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, from October 11, 1994, to January 9, 1995. An accompanying catalogue, with an essay by Joachim Pissarro called "Pissarro's Memory" and a detailed chronology of the artist's life by Stephanie Rachum, in both English and Hebrew, has been published by the Israel Museum (232 pages, $45 paper).

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that have never been publicly exhibited before now. Some of these are so surprising that they are hardly recognizable as Pissarro's work—even, I may say, for a Pissarro buff like myself. This is particularly true of the late figure paintings—*The Young Maid* (1896), for example; the *Old Winegrower in Moret (Interior)* (1902); and, most astonishing of all, the *Elderly Woman Mending Old Clothes, Moret* (also 1902, when Pissarro was seventy-two), which, as painting, takes us right into the world of Vuillard, but a Vuillard who has gone to school to Millet and Van Gogh. This is a pictorial realm which it would never before have occurred to us to associate with Pissarro, yet the result is wholly original, wholly Pissarro. Neither the subject nor the feeling shows the least trace of Vuillard's romance with the over-upholstered world of bourgeois privacy. The scene in Pissarro is that of the dour existence of peasants and workers, yet the pictorial space is charted with a painterly architecture that is strikingly parallel to that of Vuillard's interiors and executed with a virtuosic handling which even Vuillard could not match. The "subtleties, passages, modulations, [and] mediation of contrasts," which Clement Greenberg observed in Pissarro's painting more than fifty years ago, fill every centimeter of the canvas with an unfailing masterly touch. The result is painting that breaks free of much that constituted Impressionist orthodoxy even for Pissarro. We are instead in the high tide of Post-Impressionist painting on its way to the early, pre-Fauve Matisse, whose first masterwork—*La Desserte* (1897)—is in so many respects an *hommage* to late Pissarro.

In thinking about the late paintings in the current Pissarro exhibition and the late "series" paintings in "The Impressionist and the City" of 1992–93, I am reminded once again of how far we have recently come in getting to know Pissarro and of the changes this has brought in our critical assessment of his achievement. The essay that Lionello Venturi devoted to Pissarro in his study of *Impressionists and Symbolists* (1950), for example, contains many marvelous observations of the man and his work. Above all, Venturi insisted that "although a convinced naturalist, [Pissarro] soon understood that art was not a subjection to the data of nature but rather an autonomous reality which differed from nature," and Venturi himself fully understood that "the efforts of our artists [that] are concentrated on the attainment of the autonomy of art" constituted one of the great projects of modernism. And while he also appreciated the depth of Pissarro's political sentiments, which were those of a libertarian anarchist—"a man of great heart," Venturi wrote of Pissarro, "he espoused the cause of the disinherited and considered himself one of them"—it was also observed that the artist "never stooped to use [his painting] as an instrument for achieving his moral and social ideals." Yet for all the sympathy and understanding that Venturi lavished on Pissarro, he was nonetheless moved to conclude that "Pissarro's absolute value as an artist is to be found in his works before 1880." That is a judgment which it is no longer possible to uphold.

Another issue that proved to be an extremely vexing one for an earlier generation of Pissarro's admirers was the artist's lifelong quest for a principle of "unity" in his painting. Clement Greenberg, in the 1944 article I have already cited, speaks of the "little masterpieces . . . to be found complete in themselves in the dozen or so brushstrokes with which such a detail as a cab is indicated," then goes on to say that "it was only Pissarro's inhibiting preconception of unity that prevented him from treating the whole canvas in the same manner." Pissarro's artistic development is indeed haunted by his painstaking search for the kind of formal unity, or principle of pictorial integration, that would fully satisfy a fidelity to the imperative but unruly "sensations" which he derived from the observation of nature, and he spoke of the problem with his customary mixture of modesty, candor, and determination. "I started to understand my sensations, to know what I wanted," he wrote in 1890, "when I was in my forties, but only vaguely;

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when I was fifty, that is, in 1880, I had an inkling of the idea of unity, but I could not express it; at sixty, I am starting to see a way of expressing [it]." It was a search that caused him for a few years to surrender his pictorial practice to the stylistic innovations of the younger Seurat, which he then rejected but nonetheless learned a good deal from. It was that search, too, that turned him into the kind of painter who "never paints the same picture, who always paints a new picture." In the end, it was a search that, far from constituting an "inhibiting" obstacle to "treating the whole canvas" as a painterly unity, triumphantly achieved it. You can see that quality achieved in pictures as different from each other as the remarkable landscape called *Flood, Twilight Effect, Eragny* (1893)—another masterwork rarely before seen in public—and the *Elderly Woman Mending Old Clothes, Moret*. You could see dozens of examples, moreover, in the late "series" paintings that had been gathered for the first time in "The Impressionist and the City." Had Clement Greenberg been in a position to write about that exhibition, or had he lived to see the present one at the Jewish Museum, my guess is that he would have revised his judgment on this matter.

For what has changed our view of late Pissarro is not only our greater access to the masterpieces of the later years, but our understanding of the way that the idea of pictorial unity in painting has been altered by our vastly enlarged acquaintance with the late work of virtually all the Impressionist painters. Beginning in the 1950s, when the late paintings of Monet were first understood to have a formal unity that had far more in common with certain Abstract Expressionist paintings than with Monet's own earlier work, the notion of what constituted unity in a picture began to undergo a radical revision. Our greater familiarity with late Degas caused a similar change. What might roughly be called the model of late Cézanne on its way to becoming Cubism—the model that defined pictorial orthodoxy for a good many decades—was, perforce, supplanted by a more various range of possibilities, and the late paintings of Pissarro are now among the last works of the Impressionist generation to benefit from this revisionist attitude toward what is to be regarded as a legitimate principle of unity in painting. This is only one of the factors that has changed our appreciation of Pissarro's achievement, but it is an important one. To understand it, however, you have to be interested in the art of painting—for Pissarro remains today what he was for his own artist contemporaries, an artists' artist—and it is by no means certain that, even for an exhibition as fine as "Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator," that interest remains a compelling one for the art public today.

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Christopher Lasch vs. the elites

by Roger Kimball

A characteristic of our times is the predominance, even in groups traditionally selective, of the mass and the vulgar. Thus, in intellectual life, which of its essence requires and presupposes qualification, one can note the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectual, unqualified, unqualifiable . . .
—Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*

. . . the bad news goes on and on.
—Christopher Lasch

With the untimely death of Christopher Lasch last year at the age of sixty-one, we were deprived of one of our most articulate and earnestly plangent social critics. By training, Lasch was a historian of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture. Early books like *The New Radicalism in America: 1889–1963* (1965) and *The Agony of the American Left* (1969) chronicled the manifold ambitions and disappointments of American radicalism—ambitions and disappointments, incidentally, that were very close to Lasch's own heart. But he aspired to be more than a chronicler. By the mid-1970s, having learned to blend the seductive techniques of Freudian social analysis with crisply written, up-to-the-minute diagnoses of contemporary cultural pathologies, Lasch had emerged as the bad conscience of the American Left. His focus became broader, his rhetoric more apocalyptic. His most famous book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), was a stinging indictment of American society for being greedy, flaccidly self-centered, and politically frivolous. Subtitled "American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations," the book was the perfect intellectual corollary to the dour presidency of Jimmy Carter—indeed, Carter's adoption of Lasch's theme in one of his televised sermons to the nation helped to make the book a best seller.

Although its language was sometimes over-blown—one section is entitled "The Banality of Pseudo-Self-Awareness: Theatrics of Politics and Everyday Existence"—there was a lot to admire in *The Culture of Narcissism*. What one witnessed in its pages was the spectacle of an intelligent, politically committed man of the Left struggling to make sense of a culture in the grip of a radicalism that had turned out to be almost entirely bogus. Lasch was especially caustic about the hedonistic antics of the so-called New Left. He understood that what presented itself in the lineaments of radical consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s was mostly a blind for moralistic self-indulgence. Promises of liberation and transcendence, he saw, often concealed new forms of tyranny and irresponsibility. Lasch considered himself a radical, but his criticism of contemporary America—parts of it, anyway—sounded a distinctly conservative note. In a section on "Schooling and the New Illiteracy," for example, he had this to say about the Left's effort to "democratize" education:

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> It has neither improved popular understanding of modern society, raised the quality of popular culture, nor reduced the gap between wealth and poverty, which remains as wide as ever. On the other hand, it has contributed to the decline of critical thought and the erosion of intellectual standards, forcing us to consider the possibility that mass education, as conservatives have argued all along, is intrinsically incompatible with the maintenance of educational standards.

Reading such passages—and they occur frequently in Lasch's later work—it is sometimes easy to forget that his attack on our cultural "malaise" (a favored Laschian epithet) issued from an unwavering commitment to radical populism. However devastating was his exposure of the fatuities of the New Left, the real villains, in his view, were "capitalism," "mass communications," and "the corporations"—the usual suspects put forward by the Left. Hence he attacks "welfare liberalism, which absolves individuals of moral responsibility and treats them as victims of social circumstance." But he places the blame for the shambles not on the questionable policies of the New Deal and the Great Society but on "capitalism" and its "new modes of social control."

Such themes are a constant in Lasch's work. In a postscript to *The Agony of the American Left*, written in the aftermath of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, he concluded that "it is clearer than ever that radicalism is the only long-term hope for America." Only a "radicalized liberalism," embodied in "a leader like Ted Kennedy or John Lindsay" (remember John Lindsay?), could provide a bulwark against "the right-wing assault [on] civil liberties" and "postpone the collapse of liberal capitalism." Note well: according to Lasch, even a paragon like Kennedy or Lindsay could only retard capitalism's day of reckoning: "In the long run, . . . liberalism cannot eliminate the contradictions of that system"—a system, he insisted, that rests on "imperialism, elitism, racism, and inhuman acts of technological destruction." Who was to blame? There were many candidates; but high on Lasch's list were "the oil industry, the auto industry, the insurance companies, the makers of armaments." "If America is to become a democracy," Lasch concluded, "the only question is whether the power of these corporations can be destroyed piecemeal . . . or whether it will be destroyed by some ultimate confrontation in the future."

In his later work, Lasch was more sophisticated. There are, for example, no paeans to the likes of Ted Kennedy or John Lindsay. But he never abandoned his deep anti-capitalist animus. "Corporations," especially "multi-national corporations," were always suspect. Lasch's hostility to capitalism went beyond the usual litany of complaints: that capitalism exploited the working class, that it tended to act as a solvent on social and moral traditions, that it pandered to the lowest common denominator in its never-ending search for new markets. To be sure, Lasch vigorously affirmed such criticisms; but for him they were only part of the story. In his view, the fundamental problem with capitalism was its addiction to increase. That is to say, what admirers of capitalism have cited as its greatest strength—its seemingly unlimited productive capacity—Lasch identified as its most culpable weakness. In many ways, this is the theme of his magnum opus, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991).[1] In this long, erudite, somewhat sprawling work, Lasch mounted an attack on the "ideology" of progress, which he saw as a natural coefficient of capitalism. The title of his concluding section, "Populism against Progress," sums up his position. He believed that the commitment to progress, fueled by unfettered capitalism, denies "limits" and transforms people into insatiable consumers. ("Consumer" is perhaps his most withering term of abuse.) Remnants of the populist tradition that he extolled as an alternative to elite consumer culture lived on, he argued, in the working-

1 See my review essay "The Disaffected Populist: Christopher Lasch on Progress" in *The New Criterion* for March 1991.

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class sensibility of the petty-bourgeois, "its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress."

By the time Lasch got around to writing *The True and Only Heaven*, his suite of concerns had taken on a metaphysical, even a theological cast. The "sense of limits" that he identified as the "unifying thread" of his book was more than a matter of prudence: it became a kind of existential dogma. Capitalism was still an enemy, but so was the "sense of unlimited power conferred by science—the intoxicating prospect of man's conquest of the natural world." Lasch's social-political criticism melded with a moral repugnance toward the Promethean ambitions of modernity.

There is a lot of moral repugnance and condemnation in Lasch's last book, a posthumously published collection of thirteen essays that constitute an unsystematic coda to his criticism of American society. Entitled *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, [2] the book revisits most of the classic Laschian themes. It is not a cheery tale. After an introduction describing "The Democratic Malaise," there are three sections: "The Intensification of Social Divisions," "Democratic Discourse in Decline," and—what else?—"The Dark Night of the Soul." There are essays with such titles as "Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?" (the answer is "yes," but not as it's currently practiced in the U.S. of A.), "The Lost Art of Argument," "The Abolition of Shame," and "Academic Pseudo-radicalism: The Charade of 'Subversion'"—this last being, in part, a criticism of my book *Tenured Radicals*.

Lasch was never what one would call an upbeat critic. Words like "optimism," "progress," "affluence," even "happiness" were anathema to him. (At the end of his concluding essay, waxing biblical, he tells his readers that "the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy.") But in this final statement Christopher Lasch seems gloomier than ever. Of course, that might simply be because the realities he describes *are* more gloomy now than in the past. But there is more to it than that. Nor is it enough to observe that Lasch was a dying man when he was completing this book. The pall is more than merely personal. To a large extent, I believe, the unremitting gloominess of Lasch's late work proceeds from his disappointment that contemporary America was clearly not developing into the rigorous populist society he had always dreamed about. Unaccountably, many people still cared about making money and "getting ahead," even after he had pointed out the folly of materialism. They were selfish, ill-informed, duped by politicians and "the corporations." Lasch spoke of "America in an Age of Diminishing Expectations"; one senses that his own expectations became so diminished that he regarded buoyancy in others as a sign of weakness or hypocrisy.

This makes reading Lasch an odd experience. The whole seems less than the sum of its parts. One cannot but agree with many of Lasch's observations and criticisms. He was, after all, an astute critic of society, and anyone not smitten with the radical pieties of the 1960s will again and again find himself endorsing this or that piece of cultural anatomization. For example, this statement, taken from his introduction, ought to be recited daily by all politicians and civil servants: "Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state." Extra credit would be allotted for reciting this as well: "A misplaced compassion degrades both the victims, who are reduced to objects of pity, and their would-be benefactors, who find it easier to pity their fellow citizens than to hold them up to impersonal standards, attainment of which would entitle them to respect." Unfortunately, such statements do not tell the whole story. Taken together, the essays in this book paint a picture that tends to ring false, as if some trick of lighting or perspective had rendered the scene untrue

2 *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, by Christopher Lasch; Norton, 276 pages, $22.

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even though the objects depicted in it remain recognizable.

Part of the problem is rhetorical. Lasch can be a very effective writer, but he specializes in lists like this one:

> The mounting evidence of widespread inefficiency and corruption, the decline of American productivity, the pursuit of speculative profits at the expense of manufacturing, the deterioration of our country's material infrastructure, the squalid conditions in our crime-ridden cities, the alarming and disgraceful growth of poverty, and the widening disparity between poverty and wealth . . .

Etcetera, etcetera. It's not so much that he is wrong in his observations as that he is numbingly relentless. Or consider his use of the adjective "growing," invariable whenever there is bad news to be conveyed. In Japan, a 1987 poll revealed "a growing belief that the country could no longer be described as middle-class"; in America today, we find a "growing contempt for manual labor"; as far back as 1890 there was a "growing gulf between wealth and poverty"; then there is "the growing insularity of the elites," not to mention the "growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term repsonsibilities and commitments."

On the positive side, consider "Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?," which contains some of the best passages and aperçus in the book. Although the name of Matthew Arnold is never mentioned in *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch's understanding of the relation between culture and democracy is, at least in one crucial respect, distinctly Arnoldian—and hence distinctly at odds with current political dogma. Like Arnold, Lasch insists that true democracy does not entail a debasement of standards. As Arnold observed in *Culture and Anarchy*, "culture" in his sense "does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; . . . It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere." Hence it is that "the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time." Today, of course, the contention that some ideas are better than others—let alone that some deserve to be called "the best"—is rejected as an elitist crime against "diversity."

But Lasch is at his Arnoldian best when he observes that tolerance for diversity does not require a lowering or selective application of standards. "The latest variation on this familiar theme," he writes, "its *reductio ad absurdum*, is that a respect for cultural diversity forbids us to impose the standards of privileged groups on the victims of oppression." What this amounts to is "a recipe for universal incompetence." It is also a prescription for spiritual anemia. Partisans of "cultural diversity" reject the idea that there are "impersonal virtues like fortitude, workmanship, moral courage, honesty, and respect for adversaries." But Lasch is right that if we believe in these things, we must be prepared to recommend them to everyone. "Unless we are prepared to make demands on one another, we can enjoy only the most rudimentary kind of common life." Like Arnold, he argues that common standards "are absolutely indispensable to a democratic society," not least because "double standards mean second-class citizenship."

Arnold is not the only ghost haunting these pages. The shade of Allan Bloom also makes a few cameo appearances. Readers of *The Closing of the American Mind* will remember Bloom's blistering attack on how the liberal virtue of "openness" had been trivialized in contemporary American society. "Openness," Bloom wrote, "used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power. The unrestrained and thoughtless pursuit of openness . . . has rendered openness meaningless." Similarly, Lasch, expatiating on the "moral paralysis of those who value 'openness' above all," observes that democracy means something more than "'openness'

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and toleration." "In the absence of common standards," he writes, "tolerance becomes indifference" and the ideal of an open mind degenerates into that of an "empty mind."

> We have become too proficient in making excuses for ourselves—worse, in making excuses for the "disadvantaged." We are so busy defending our rights (rights conferred, for the most part, by judicial decree) that we give little thought to our responsibilities. We seldom say what we think, for fear of giving offense. We are determined to respect everyone, but we have forgotten that respect has to be earned. Respect is not another word for tolerance or the appreciation of "alternative lifestyles and communities." This is a tourist's approach to morality. Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgment, not indiscriminate acceptance.

One wishes one could say "Amen" and have done with it. But Lasch never makes it easy. "Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?" is one of the best essays in *The Revolt of the Elites* because it focuses on the depredations of what has come to be called political correctness and, although written with great moral seriousness, it does not descend to moralistic sermonizing. The same cannot be said for many of the other essays. "The Democratic Malaise," his introduction, is a case in point. This essay is a kind of annotated précis or preview of the book's contents. In his peroration, Lasch, drawing on such left-wing gurus as Mickey Kaus and Michael Walzer, tells us that before we can properly inhabit a democracy we must learn to "devalue money" and the importance of "the market." This of course is an age-old theme—lamentations about the evils of money have been around as long as money itself. But Lasch, characteristically, turns up the volume of this complaint. "Luxury," he intones, "is morally repugnant." Moreover, "the difficulty of limiting the influence of wealth suggests that wealth itself needs to be limited." In his view, "a democratic society cannot allow unlimited accumulation." Hence he calls for "a moral condemnation of great wealth . . . backed up with effective political action" in order to bring about "at least a rough approximation of economic equality." Furthermore, hankering after his populist paradise of yore, he tells us that "in the old days" Americans agreed that individuals should not claim entitlement to wealth "far in excess of their needs."

How many things are wrong with this little tableau? Let us confine ourselves to the two most obvious problems. First of all, Lasch seems entirely oblivious of the fact that the great democracies grew up in periods of vigorous economic expansion. Think of fifth-century Athens, of eighteenth-century Britain, of nineteenth-century America. Far from eschewing "great wealth," these societies depended on it. It helped constitute their glory. And when we come to "the old days" when Americans were supposedly averse to great wealth, what can this mean? (And who is to decide how much wealth is "far in excess" of one's needs? One's needs according to whom? According to Christopher Lasch?) Most people would consider that Alexis de Tocqueville was writing about "the old days" in *Democracy in America* (first published in 1835). "I know of no country," Tocqueville wrote in his first volume of that work, "where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property." Later on, he returned to this theme: "the passions that agitate the Americans most deeply are not their political but their commercial passions; . . . They prefer the good sense which amasses large fortunes to that enterprising genius which frequently dissipates them." So much the worse for our early-nineteenth-century forebears, perhaps; but then when were the good-old-days to which Lasch would have us revert?

The title of Lasch's book and of its lead essay is a play on Ortega y Gasset's famous book *The Revolt of the Masses*. Written in the

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early 1930s, when the masses really were revolting, Ortega's book warned of the emergence of "a hyperdemocracy in which the mass acts directly, outside the law," to impose its will on the rest of society. Arrogating to himself "unlimited rights," the mass man felt himself "exempt from all submission to superiors." He was, in Ortega's arresting phrase, the "spoiled child of human history." Lasch's contention is that just about everything that Ortega said about the masses back in 1932 now applies more to the elites. Lasch was particularly impressed with what Ortega said about the grandiose sense of entitlement and "limitless possibility"—were not these precisely the qualities exhibited by today's affluent elites, "those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate"? Lasch believed so.

In one sense, Lasch's attack on the elites is part of his continuing effort to extol the virtues of the lower-middle class, whose "political instincts" are "demonstrably more conservative than those of their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators." It is they, he writes, who have developed a "sense of limits," "favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with 'alternative lifestyles,' and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering." Well, maybe. But the curious thing about Lasch's attack on "the elites" is that it applies almost entirely to the *liberal* elite. As usual, Lasch paints a dismal picture of psychological ineptitude and self-centeredness. But whom is he talking about? And why does he limit bestowing the virtues he admires—from the "sense of limits" to "deep reservations about affirmative action"—to the inarticulate "common man" he claims to be championing? Are not many of the items on his menu of approved attitudes part and parcel of a conservative tradition that, while hardly confined to the lower-middle class, is certainly alive and well in American society today? Lasch seems to feel that unless one subscribes to his ascetic populism one is a sorry exemplar of Nietzsche's Last Man, feeble, narcissistic, at once obsessed with health and terrified of death. Lasch writes about "the revolt of the elites," but he never really addresses the question of the proper role of elites in a complex modern democracy. In this context, it is significant that he draws elaborate parallels between Ortega's description of the masses and today's elites, but never even mentions such classic reflections on the role of the elites in democratic society as Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.*

Lasch tells us that our equation of the American Dream with "social mobility" is "sadly impoverished." But one comes away from this book—as from his other recent work—feeling that the alternatives that he allowed himself to contemplate were impoverished, too—sometimes sadly so. One of his main criticisms of *Tenured Radicals* was that in my attack on relativism I was guilty of "foundationalism," that is, of believing that knowledge must be grounded in "propositions unassailable by doubt." Conservatives generally, he complained, think that "either knowledge rests on immutable foundations or men and women are free to think whatever they please." Actually, both "unassailable by doubt" and "immutable" are Lasch's interpolations. The real question is whether we believe there is such a thing as truth that is more than a pragmatic convenience. I would agree that "the impossibility of certainty does not preclude the possibility of reasoned discourse—of assertions that command provisional assent even though they lack unimpeachable foundations and are therefore subject to revision." But "subject to revision" does not mean "entirely up for grabs." When Lasch turned to relativists like John Dewey and, even more, Clifford Geertz for an alternative to "foundationalism," he embraced an alternative that not only denies certainty but also denies the possibility of truth. Seeking to

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avoid one sort of absolutism, he unwittingly adopted another: the absolutism of the confirmed relativist.

Lasch presented himself as a stern critic of nostalgia, and in some ways he was. But the truth is that a powerful current of nostalgia pulses through his work. It is a nostalgia not only for a simpler time when "local and regional loyalties" were alive and well, but also for a species of mankind that was nobler, more responsible, less materialistic than any found outside the generous imaginings of populists and other utopians. As Lasch himself was quick to point out, one of the liabilities of nostalgia—which might be defined as a kind of metaphysical homesickness—is that it tends to blind its sufferers to various realities. Lasch never tired of railing against "careerism" and the cult of "specialized expertise," which he described as "the antithesis of democracy." I thought of this when I read his poignant acknowledgment thanking his wife for teaching him how to use a word processor: "without this helpful machine, which would have remained inaccessible to me without her guidance, this book could not have been completed in the allotted time." Did he ever consider how much "careerism" and "specialized expertise" went into that little bundle of microchips and software?

A book that I suspect Lasch would have admired had he lived to see it is *The Tory View of Landscape*, written by an expatriate Brit named Nigel Everett and published last fall by Yale. "Toryism," as Everett conceived it, was informed "by a strong sense of responsibility in the management and distribution of scarce resources, [it was] attentive to its own ideas of social cohesion, and . . . continuing obligations to the past and the future. Among its obvious weaknesses was a limited interest in many of the processes by which material wealth is created and may be expanded." One can see Lasch nodding with eager agreement until the last sentence: "the processes by which material wealth is created and may be expanded," in other words, free-market capitalism. Lasch was all for fostering self-reliance and responsibility among "ordinary men and women," but it is not at all clear that he appreciated the extent to which genuine self-reliance often goes hand in hand with material well-being.

A final word about religion. Religion—or the idea of religion—played an increasingly large role in Lasch's later thinking. He was, I think, one of those secular intellectuals who feel that religion is a "good thing" without being able to bring themselves to subscribe to its teachings. He recognized that "it is impossible to revive religious belief simply because it serves a useful social purpose" but nonetheless felt that the liberal elites he so despised were missing something in their wholesale animus toward traditional religious belief. In "The Soul of Man under Secularism," the last essay in the book, Lasch considers various ways in which modern man has dealt with what Friedrich Schiller called the "disenchantment of the world." He is correct, I think, that adamant disillusionment is the peculiar form of hubris that secular modernity has bred: the Nietzschean stance of being "disillusioned but undaunted," as if the extent of one's disillusionment were an index of one's wisdom—or at least one's courage. But what is perhaps most noteworthy is the way Lasch attempts to salvage some margin of religious commitment. Traditionally, of course, religion has functioned in part as a source of existential consolation. Lasch would have us downplay that aspect of religious teaching, eager, as always, to combat the tendency to "make people feel good about themselves." For Lasch "the spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion." A person with "a proper understanding of religion," he says, would see it not as "a source of intellectual and emotional security," but as "a challenge to complacency and pride." There is of course something to this. For pride is assuredly the enemy of religious life. But how touching, how sad, really, that even here, even when it was a matter of life's ultimate mysteries, we find Lasch arguing against the possibility of consolation or solace.

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Fighting for Herland: the sex wars of Gilbert & Gubar

by Paul Dean

Letters from the Front is the final volume of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's trilogy *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century.*[1] It succeeds *The War of the Words* (1988) and *Sexchanges* (1989), and, like them, is a deeply exasperating book, containing some good literary criticism and much cultural-historical nonsense. Virginia Woolf must take her share of the blame for the latter, on account of her invention in *A Room of One's Own*, cited in *The War of the Words*, of the "man's sentence":

> All the great novelists like Thackeray and Dickens and Balzac have written a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property. They have based it on the sentence that was current at the time. The sentence that was current at the beginning of the nineteenth century ran something like this perhaps: "The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generations of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success." That is a man's sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest. It was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use.

Taken literally, such a claim is entirely meaningless—as if one could speak of "the" nineteenth-century sentence, let alone of a "man's sentence"! What Woolf seems to be saying, in a tediously arch way, is that the Latinate syntax in which the eighteenth-century classics were written (formed on models which the authors had studied at school and university) was not a suitable style for the emerging genre of the novel. Gilbert and Gubar, however, take Woolf's point very seriously, lamenting the lack of "serious research into empirical linguistics" which might have laid bare the special features of men's or women's sentences. There has been some work done, they inform us, on "notably different male and female speech behaviors and vocabularies," but linguisticians have not yet decided "whether women speak a distinctive language or whether they are perceived to speak such a language." The cast of mind which believes that language can be approached in this way is really frightening, but in its unplumbable ignorance it is characteristic of one side of Gilbert and Gubar's work.

At the heart of their enterprise has been, they say, the question: "How can a woman

1 *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 3: Letters from the Front*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar; Yale University Press, 476 pages, $35. The previous volumes of *No Man's Land* are also available from Yale: *Volume 1: The War of the Words* (320 pages, $14 paper) and *Volume 2: Sexchanges* (455 pages, $20 paper).

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achieve personhood?" That is easily answered: she can't, for no such thing exists. Women achieve womanhood, and men, manhood. Such a reply, however, is viewed by Gilbert and Gubar with pity—mixed, to be sure, with tolerance, for even Freud, they concede, "seemed to believe that there was such a quality as 'womanliness.' When he asked, 'What do women want?' he implied that there were, ontologically, such beings as 'women.'" Well, if Freud could make such an absurd mistake, what hope for the rest of us? It was not entirely Freud's fault; he lived too early to profit from the realization that "the very concepts *woman* and *man* have been rendered increasingly fictive by a century of sex wars and sexchanges." The use, in the sentence quoted above, of "ontologically" rather than "biologically" is a significant sleight-of-hand—or perhaps it isn't, perhaps they really believe it. Just possibly they also believe their constant recourse to military metaphor ("sex wars") to describe the relationship between men and women has some foundation in reality. But one can never be sure, since, like most theorists, they don't recognize a literal level of meaning for words but see everything as figurative or symbolic. They quote, without protest, Andrea Dworkin's statement that "intercourse remains a means or the means of physiologically making a woman inferior." That is an outrageous insult to human nature, a brutal and reductive denial of the possibility of love; yet, amid the overheated talk of warfare, it becomes almost axiomatic.

Perhaps the most helpful way in which to present *No Man's Land* is in terms of the concept of literary history which underpins it—which enables Gilbert and Gubar to make some of their best points as well as some of their worst. In their first volume they have a mind-boggling travesty of T. S. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," attributed to John Guillory but apparently endorsed by them, according to which "an implicitly masculine aesthetic of hard, abstract, learned verse" is "opposed to the aesthetic of soft, effusive, personal verse supposedly written by women and Romantics." Eliot could be misogynistic enough, Heaven knows, but I do not think he would have recognized this as a summary of his views. Thankfully, the final volume in the trilogy offers a subtler account of how literary inheritance is transmitted and transmuted. The chapter on Virginia Woolf, for example, reasonably points to her mockery of Carlyle and Gibbon in *To the Lighthouse*, linking this to her suspicion of concepts such as periodicity and historical "laws," against which she championed the importance of private, inner histories; while constructive use is made of the fact that Sylvia Plath's last home was a flat in a house once occupied by Yeats—a striking coincidence in view of Plath's admiration for, and debt to, him. Equally valuable is the observation that an "aesthetic of renunciation" practiced by nineteenth-century women poets became, in the hands of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore, an "aesthetic of self-dramatization" aiming, but failing, to negotiate successfully the balance between attracting publicity and preserving integrity.

Literary heritage is frequently presented by Gilbert and Gubar in gender terms, owing much to Freud, and it is when they stray into this area that their arguments lose force. Nobody questions that Virginia Woolf's portrayal of Mr. Ramsay is a way of coming to terms with her relationship with her own father, Sir Leslie Stephen, but does it really follow that she therefore saw the past as patriarchal? Gilbert and Gubar themselves show that Millay learned creativity from Marvell and Keats, and Plath from Yeats; these were not enemies to be routed. The predilection of Millay and Moore for regular poetic forms, in particular the sonnet, is seen as a consequence of their femininity, in contrast to Pound's and Eliot's exploration of fragmented form; but here we may remember Eliot's remark about the nineteenth-century poets who "had not the sensibility to perceive that, because they felt differently, they must use words differently." Do Gilbert and Gubar really think modernism would have arrived if everyone had been

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content to go on writing sonnets? The most extreme instance of psychological interpretation comes in the chapter on H.D., who actually underwent analysis with Freud (and denounced his "tyranny" in "The Master"). Her work is seen by Gilbert and Gubar as a vital example of what they call the "family romance" or the "affiliation complex" which, they believe, has beset female writers in our time. They distinguish three stages: first, the female writer sees her literary heritage in paternal terms; then, reacting against this, she experiences a "renunciation of aesthetic desire" which leads to a kind of creative frigidity; finally, she adopts a female muse, a mother figure who releases her inhibitions. H.D.'s "efforts to achieve literary potency" contradict Freud's belief that the attachment to the father figure is normal, that to the mother figure regressive.

The unsatisfactoriness of this lies not so much—or not only—in its vacuity but in the fact that, as applied to H.D., there may be some truth in it—and, if so, the lack of connection between Freudian sophistication and real creativity is the more sharply exposed. For H.D. really *was* obsessed with the significance, for her view of herself as founding priestess of a new religion, of the fact that she had been born in Bethlehem (Pennsylvania). (One remembers the comparable case of Henry IV, in Shakespeare's plays, who planned a crusade to the Holy Land having been told he would die in Jerusalem, and ended up expiring in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey.) She built into her poems images of frigidity, drawing on *The Winter's Tale* for the title character of *HERmione* (1927) and for the middle name (Perdita) of her own daughter. "The mother as stone statue, the exiled lost daughter," in Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, are significant motifs in her work. There may be a genuine correlation between her anxiety to achieve dual identity in a world which contained, as she said, "two of everybody (except myself)," and her tendency to use unrhymed or half-rhymed couplets in her poetry. But none of this will make her work any better, or rescue it from the charge of collapsing into mystical vaporing of a particularly empty kind.

And here, at last, we come to the fundamental point—the point evaded throughout these three weighty volumes of cultural history: namely, that when confronted with a literary work, by a writer of either sex, the first question we ask is: is it any good? In answering that question we can apply a number of criteria, but the gender of the writer will not be among them. I am assuming that readers of *The New Criterion* will share my belief in the possibility and necessity of value judgments in the old sense, not the Gilbert and Gubar sense in which *everything* is a tremendously profound work of art. (Still, better that than the belief that profound works of art don't exist.) Of all the writers considered in the trilogy how many are significant creative artists? How many names could we set alongside Emily Dickinson, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath? Some would argue for Kate Chopin or Willa Cather. But when literary rather than cultural significance is in question the number must be relatively small. Gilbert and Gubar might protest that we are judging by "male" aesthetic criteria, measuring their authors against a canon and a tradition overwhelmingly patriarchal. The likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Adrienne Rich, or Erica Jong would never receive a fair hearing, they would say. Part of the difficulty of this objection is that it wants to read literary history backward. I would readily admit that the contribution of female authors to English literature has been unfairly slighted until recent times (the few classic names apart), and I am delighted that we now have the opportunity to read, in relatively accessible editions, the work of Aemilia Lanyer or Mary Wroth or Delarivière Manley, among others. But Virginia Woolf's parable, in *A Room of One's Own*, about Shakespeare's imaginary sister, sounds a cautionary note. This young lady, denied her brother's opportunities for formal education and travel, was kept at home and trained in the domestic duties appropriate

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for her destiny as wife and mother. Rebelling against the marriage her well-meaning parents arranged for her, she fled to London, where her attempts to join an acting company were rebuffed. She was seduced by an actor-manager and committed suicide. Virginia Woolf's conclusion is so politically incorrect that it had better be quoted in her own words:

> That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But . . . it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people.

Woolf is arguing that women in Shakespeare's day—with exceptions, like the Countess of Pembroke, which merely prove the rule—were denied the educational and social opportunities which foster creative power. This was to a large extent true, and we can only rejoice at the fact that it is true no longer. But in terms of what our classic authors read—which is what matters when we are estimating the growth of a tradition—it's also a fact that until the last hundred and fifty years or so the works that counted were by male authors.

It would be interesting to examine why this was so—and why it occurred at a fairly specific period. Medieval literature does not lack female authors (Christine de Pisan, Marie de France) although they are relatively few; but, as is often observed, there was not much of a Renaissance for women. It was with the growth of the novel as a form that they gained in real influence, and even then were not always sympathetic to one another. Jane Austen learned as an artist from Fanny Burney but her favorite author remained Dr. Johnson; while it was George Eliot who, in 1856, produced a sustained piece of demolition work called "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," which insisted that over-production by female authors debases the currency. Gilbert and Gubar mention this piece in observing Edith Wharton's preference for James over the kind of fiction George Eliot derides, but they do not quote Eliot's essay. They might ponder this:

> Every critic who forms a high estimate of the share women may ultimately take in literature, will, on principle, abstain from any exceptional indulgence towards the productions of literary women. For it must be plain to every one who looks impartially and extensively into feminine literature, that its greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art. . . . The foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counter balanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is a proof of superiority in a woman. On this ground, we believe that the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while the few women who write well are very far above the ordinary intellectual level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it. So that, after all, the severer critics are fulfilling a chivalrous duty in depriving the mere fact of feminine authorship of any false prestige which may give it a delusive attraction, and in recommending women of mediocre faculties—as at least a negative service they can render their sex—to abstain from writing.

Gilbert and Gubar note that Edna St. Vincent Millay maintained a more active correspondence with male writers than with female ones, and that Marianne Moore reviewed books by male authors far more often than by female authors; and they quote Moore's words in a letter to Kathleen Raine: "Yes, I know they did say I was the best woman poet in this country; but, you see, Miss Raine, that means nothing, just nothing at all; because here in America not more than two, or perhaps three, women have ever even *tried* to write poetry." In

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echoing George Eliot, Moore points to the need for any artist, male or female, to be able to draw on a tradition which supplies agreed standards as well as artistic models. The greatest writers, of either sex, have always needed this; and it is the ability to use it which makes a Dickinson, a Wharton, or a Plath a major writer, rather than the fact of her being female.

The case of Plath provides a strong illustration of this point, which I use the more eagerly because the best chapter in *Letters from the Front* is, I think, the one devoted to her. (That on Woolf, despite my earlier strictures, is almost as good.) Already in Volume 1 Plath has been mentioned in an interesting context, for the poem "Burning the Letters," which was begun on the back of a draft of "The Thought Fox," the celebrated poem by Plath's husband, Ted Hughes. Plath's poem seems to express rage against Hughes's creativity; it ends with the death of a fox whose cry (Hughes's poem?) nonetheless resonates unendingly. In *Letters from the Front* Gilbert and Gubar trace Plath's addiction to images of warfare. As is well known, the death of her German father in 1940 was an event whose psychological significance for her is hard to overestimate. Conflicts of many kinds, some of which had been years in forming, were catalyzed by this loss. Plath's exploration of her relationship to her father, in imagery drawing on the suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis, gives to her last poems an unbearable ferocity; yet to see her primarily as the author of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" is to narrow her gift.

Gilbert and Gubar are excellent on Plath's debt to Yeats, the male modernist who, despite his scoffing at the "vague Utopia" of feminism (his phrase), was still, as they say, the "most fascinated . . . by women's creative as well as procreative power." Plath, dwelling in Yeats's house, felt able also to take possession of his literary inheritance; thus a number of her poems remodel his. Yeats and Virginia Woolf became Plath's creative "parents" and, unlike some of the other women considered by Gilbert and Gubar, she worked with rather than against her exemplars.

Adaptation was the keynote, too, in her use of traditional poetic form. Citing these lines from "Lady Lazarus"

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.

Gilbert and Gubar draw attention to the echo of "Kubla Khan" and to the closeness of the cadence to that of the heroic couplet:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer, beware, beware.
> Out of the ash I rise with my red hair . . .

"Behind the apparently ragged, defiantly irregular lines of the 'real' text," they conclude, "we sense the rhythm of a kind of ghost text, so that Plath's poem is at many crucial points written simultaneously in blank verse and in 'free verse.'" Later, having made a similar point about the last two stanzas of "Stings," which are "recast as *shreds* of traditional lineation," they note the combination of Plath's "mastery of conventional norms" with her confidence in her "autonomous power" to do something significantly new with them. So too with her subject matter: had she not died when she did, Gilbert and Gubar speculate, she would have carried further the ambition, already evident in her last poems, to construct a personal and literary future independent of the experience and image of warfare.

It is surely no accident that this poet, about whom Gilbert and Gubar write most convincingly, "did not have an explicitly political imagination" and "rarely meditated on the future of gender in her society" as they admit. She was preoccupied with renewal, and as much as D. H. Lawrence could claim the phoenix as her symbol: but the rebirth was largely private. Only in "Wintering" does she envision a communal

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rebirth for women, employing one of her favorite metaphors, that of the beehive. "Will the hive survive" without the male bees? asks the poem, and returns an optimistic answer: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring." Plath's importance lies in her forging an individual vision and voice out of traditional materials, eschewing public propagandizing, striving to surmount through art her personal difficulties. In "Words," written just eight days before her suicide, she expresses a humility about language, a sense of its mysterious independence and resilience, which has always been a sign of the genuinely creative writer:

> Axes
> After whose stroke the wood rings,
> And the echoes!
> Echoes traveling
> Off from the center like horses . . .

Yet this poem concludes with a melancholy image of determinism:

> Words dry and riderless,
> The indefatigable hoof-taps
> While
> From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
> Govern a life.

"Her new self," Ted Hughes poignantly wrote, "who could do so much, could not ultimately save her."

Plath's wish to re-create herself was far removed from the parade of ventriloquial impersonations and posings which Gilbert and Gubar document in many other writers, the "sexchanges" which express, not a deep concern for identity, but merely a shallow narcissism. Similarly, Plath's ability to transcend images of war, to make of them something original and positive, throws into relief the hollowness of Gilbert and Gubar's obsession with martial metaphor. Nowhere is this more distasteful than in their chapter on an actual conflict, World War II. Looking up Hitler, A., in the index, we find just one reference, citing his belief that female emancipation was "a product of the Jewish mind." That is all the cultural historian needs to know about Hitler. As for the concentration camps, they come in handy, in Betty Friedan's writing, as an analogy for the subjection of American women to domestic drudgery. Gilbert and Gubar hasten to add that Friedan admitted the inexactness of the parallel. That does nothing to excuse its offensiveness. They feel able to claim that the war "constituted a specifically sexual warfare directed against women," that it was "a threat to the second sex" which "marked the demise of a dream of Herland," and that militarism was "a logical extension of misogyny." As pronouncements about what happened to the human race between 1939 and 1945, such statements are breathtaking in the literal sense—they leave one speechless. Even in literary-critical terms, Gilbert and Gubar seem not to find irony in their verdict that "the finest novel written about the war" is *The Naked and the Dead*—the work of a male author, Norman Mailer. What are the implications of that judgment for their attempt to rehabilitate the central role of the female writer?

But indeed, it's often hard to know how seriously Gilbert and Gubar take themselves, or expect their readers to take them. One place where we can be sure we are meant to be amused is their final chapter, "The Further Adventures of Snow White," in which they invent variants of the traditional story to illustrate, and satirize, the theoretical stances adopted by some of the authors and critics they have discussed. In one version the characters debate issues of gender identity; the wicked stepmother is bemused by the ontological nullity of Snow White and the King—"merely signifiers, signifying nothing"—and Snow White herself remains perplexed until the Prince explains to her that she is merely a language field and the King and Queen supreme fictions. Snow White then makes a daring proposal: "How about investigating the pleasure principle by disseminating your symbolic into my semiotic?"—at this point, presumably, achieving personhood. Well, I don't know what Gil-

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bert and Gubar would have said had this narrative been constructed by a male author. Perhaps they would have said something similar to their reading of the Genesis narrative of the Fall in Volume 1, in which they advance the hypothesis that the story, "with its linguistically powerful Adam and its anxious, tongue-tied Eve, is just a male fantasy devised to soothe men's feelings of secondariness, sexual dread, womb and breast envy." No doubt we are meant to find their redactions of the Snow White story wryly amusing. My reaction is to be disturbed by how they can know, with one part of their minds, the absurdity of interpretive procedures which they devote much of their three bulky tomes to taking (apparently) seriously. But this will probably confirm them in suspecting that I am incapable of understanding the arabesques the trained critical mind must perform if it is to survive in No Man's Land.

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The uneasy world of Somerville & Ross

by Richard Tillinghast

"Let us take Carbery and grind its bones to make our bread," Violet Martin wrote in a letter to Edith Oenone Somerville in 1889, "and we will serve it up to the spectator so that its mother wouldn't know it." Violet (1862–1915) was then twenty-six years old, and Edith (1858–1949) thirty-one; the two second cousins had recently finished collaborating on their first novel, *An Irish Cousin*, which would be published in London later that year. Violet, whose *nom de plume* became "Martin Ross," was writing from her family's ancestral home, Ross House, near Oughterard in County Galway. The bones she proposed to grind were those of "that fair and far-away district, the Barony of West Carbery, County Cork," as Edith later called the place in her *Irish Memories*, "the ultimate corner of the ultimate speck of Europe—Ireland." Martin's humorous, off-the-cuff characterization is powerfully suggestive of the nature and purpose of their art.

In Somerville & Ross's world, social hierarchies are strictly observed. "That they were snobs—in one sense of that word"—observes Conor Cruise O'Brien almost casually, followed naturally

> from the fact that they belonged to the Irish landed gentry. They had to look down on other people in order to see them. Or so they sincerely felt. And they wanted to see them clearly, to place them socially: "Catholic middle-class moving up"; "Protestant lower-middle-class, stuck"; "Gentleman run wild, with touch of brogue." They wrote on these matters with an almost pedantic care for accuracy, within social conventions which they thoroughly understood and thoroughly approved.

Though they were worlds better off than the mass of the Irish peasantry at the end of the nineteenth century, that Anglo-Irish landed gentry which had at one time ruled the island from their "big houses" was fast losing ground to a newly emergent and resourceful middle class of merchants, professional men, land agents, and the like—called "grabbers" by the people—who were buying up properties the Anglo-Irish were selling in the wake of recent land agitation. The famines of the 1840s, in which one-quarter of the population either died or was forced to immigrate, also ruined the landlords. As Gifford Lewis makes clear in the introduction to her edition of the Somerville & Ross letters, the Anglo-Irish, and in particular the Martins and the Somervilles, had now, like the rest of the world, to earn their own living. And they did so resourcefully and with élan. Elizabeth Bowen had this to say on the subject in 1940:

> It is, I think, to the credit of big house people that they concealed their struggles with such nonchalance and for so long continued to throw about what did not really amount to much weight. It is to their credit that, with

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> grass almost up to their doors and hardly a sixpence to turn over, they continued to be resented by the rest of Ireland as being the heartless rich.

Lady Hildegarde and Sir Egerton Coghill, Edith's sister and brother-in-law, went into the photography business and sold their pictures of the rugged West Cork shoreline to the tourist trade. Hildegarde managed a dairy herd and a violet farm from which she shipped flowers all over the British Isles. Violet Martin's mother sold her eggs and greengage plums in the market in Oughterard. In her later years we find Edith Somerville buying Irish horses and traveling to America to sell them while at the same time conducting lecture tours. The sons of these families went into the army, the navy, and the Church. Robert Martin, Violet's brother, who should have been, by right, the master of the Ross estate, which in the seventeenth century had amounted to some 200,000 acres, was a political journalist and writer of popular songs in London. Some of the female cousins became doctors or journalists, or wrote children's books.

The most common solution to financial insecurity for the daughters of impoverished gentry families, though, was marriage. Gifford Lewis, whose *Somerville & Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.* (1985) I draw on heavily here, puts it this way in her introduction to the letters: "Many an English officer took home an Anglo-Irish bride to sighs of relief in many a damp drawing-room." The haven of marriage did not appeal to Edith Somerville: her long engagement to an Oxford don, Herbert Greene, forms a kind of running gag in letters and diaries throughout most of her adult life. Somerville determined early on that she would provide for herself. Soon after the two cousins met, in 1886, their diaries contain items like "Various literary labours till tea time." The collaboration is characterized in its early stages as little more than an amusement: "We began to invent a plot for a penny thriller," Edith wrote in her diary about two years before publication of the book, which its authors and their families called "the shocker." "At it all day, except when we went down to help at the Christmas tree. Shockered far into the night."

Fiction-writing appears in the diaries and letters as an amusement akin to the charades, amateur theatricals, jumble sales, charity dances, and hunt balls that made up the social life of Castletownshend, the village where Edith Somerville grew up, and in whose life Violet Martin came increasingly to play a part as the friendship and collaboration grew. "Castle Townshend" (the name is spelled variously), as described in *Irish Memories*, "is a small village in the southwest of the county of Cork, unique in many ways among Irish villages, incomparable in the beauty of its surroundings, remarkable in its high level of civilisation, and in the number of its 'quality houses.'" The last point is particularly worth noting. Most of the Anglo-Irish lived at great geographical remove from one another. What made Castletownshend special was the presence of several gentry families who had settled there in the time of Cromwell, prospered, intermarried, attended the same church, and saw one another daily.

Despite one's sense that the work of art must speak for itself, the biography and peripheral works of one's favorite authors, those rare spirits who have left behind living monuments made of words, exercise a powerful fascination. Somerville & Ross were alive during the great days of diary-keeping and letter-writing. Their diaries (which are in the library of Queens University, Belfast) and letters (many of which are in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library) make pleasurable reading in themselves; moreover, one can see how valuable these private writings were to them as writers of fiction.

At first the two cousins lived about 150 miles apart over roads dusty or muddy by season, whose condition can only be imagined—though even today, and even in the summer, to drive north from Castletownshend over the narrow, slippy roads

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across mountainous West Cork can turn a man's thoughts toward religion. Since theirs was a collaborative process in which scenes and sentences written by one partner would be reworked and revised by the other, letters were of the utmost value. In letters, one of these quite different but complementary sensibilities attempted to explain itself to the other. On the small island of Ireland, postal service was and is infinitely more efficient than in the United States—so efficient that return addresses are not routinely written on letters. Very often an anecdote from a letter would later be spun out into a story or an episode in a novel.

In 1886 the two cousins set about writing, for fun, *The Buddh Dictionary*, a lexicon of words commonly used by their interrelated families, all of whom were directly descended from a distinguished ancestor: Charles Kendal Bushe, Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. Family pride and self-regard apparently led the two young women to identify in themselves and their relatives a Buddha-like self-sufficiency and contentment, which they simultaneously celebrated and satirized as "Buddh." Acquaintances who fit more or less into their social class but who were not Buddhs, were "suburbans"—and this included most of those English people to whom the aristocratic residents of Castletownshend rented their houses during the summers to gain some much needed income while they camped out with relatives. Edith Somerville's brother-in-law, a baronet, moved his family onto his schooner for the summer while the Big House earned rent. It was cooler on the water anyhow.

To decipher Buddh words is to enter a hundred-year-old private language of subtle, idiosyncratic, and sometimes slightly off-color wit. "I must decant," a lady might say to her relatives, leaving the room to relieve herself. A Buddh- or Bushe-leg was a limb of unusually large size—a physical trait evidently genetic. A lady's large hat might be "flangey." (Edith Somerville, known for the extravagance of her headgear, appeared at a wedding in 1944, when she was eight-six, wearing a hat topped by a stuffed seagull.) Some Buddh words were based on Irish: a "flahoola" is defined as "a large loud woman of a stupendous vulgarity." Others derive from Latin: to "absquatulate" was to express oneself loudly and vociferously. Anything *de trop* might be summed up as "Kneebuckles to a Highlander" (who, since he wore a kilt, would not need them).

For reasons which remain mysterious, there are times, places, and people that seem to have more richness, more charm, more character than other times, places, and people. Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must have been just such a place. And the Irish, high and low, were and are such people. Part of it, of course, is their linguistic genius. The sweeping, poetic gesture—often used ironically—is ready to hand: "We walked that half-mile in funereal procession behind the car," says Major Yeates, narrator of the Irish R.M. stories; [1] "the glory had departed from the weather." The homely domestic simile appears with unforced ease: "'What did she say?' Charlotte darted the question at Norry as a dog snaps at a piece of meat."

Of Christopher Dysart in *The Real Charlotte*, a servant declares, "Shure he's the gentlest crayture ever came into a house." (In her memoirs, Edith Somerville applies the same characterization to her father.) "Sure a Turk itself wouldn't be a match for her!" someone remarks of a character in the R.M. stories. "That one has a tongue that'd clip a hedge!" Flurry McCarthy Knox (in whose three names are encoded much of the social and political history of Munster), scoundrel-hero of the Irish R.M. stories, when asked about whether there might be a suitable four-year-old horse for sale, replies, using a trope that is still to be heard in Ireland: "There isn't a four-year-old in this country that I'd be seen dead with at a pig fair."

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1 The adventures of Major Sinclair Yeates, Resident Magistrate, are collected in *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1908), and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1915).

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Between their first novel, *An Irish Cousin*, and their masterpiece, *The Real Charlotte* (1894), came a novel about the land wars called *Naboth's Vineyard* and two travel books written for money. *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart*, where they reported on their native Ireland for an English audience, and *In the Vine Country*, which took them to France, were both commissioned by the *Lady's Pictorial* and illustrated with drawings by Edith Somerville, who studied art in Paris and was a gifted painter and draftsman. She wryly dismisses the activity of the travel books as "Tours, Idle Tours." But in *The Real Charlotte* they achieved what must, consciously or unconsciously, be the goal of all writers: they wrote the book that they alone, by temperament, experience, and gifts, could have brought into being.

Charlotte Mullen is one of the nineteenth century's most complex, unhappy, and convincing villains—sympathetic and repellent at the same time. Mention Somerville & Ross to most readers—those who have heard of them at all—and what will come to mind is a romanticized view of Anglo-Irish life in the days before the Republic, replete with sentimentalized, stage-Irish characters. How far this notion is from the actuality of these authors' vision! They understood human nature and knew their world much too thoroughly for such prettification, and seem to have been compelled to write the book by some irresistible fascination with the darker side of humanity. In *Irish Memories* Edith Somerville invokes the biblical proportions of this fascination when she writes that "those unattractive beings, Charlotte Mullen, Roddy Lambert, The Turkey-Hen [Lambert's first wife], entered like the plague of frogs into our kneading-troughs, our wash-tubs, our bedchambers."

A contemporary review in the *Lady's Pictorial* shows how far *The Real Charlotte* departed from the reading public's taste in literary accounts of the Irish, with their supposed "happy go-lucky mode of life, the curious mingling of shrewdness and childishness, the vulgarity which is offensive only when it becomes snobbish, and the irrepressible love of fun and frolic . . ." The reviewer goes on: "The next time that E. Oe. Somerville and Martin Ross combine to write a novel of Irish life I hope they will keep to the fun. . . . But the book is marked throughout by a persistent preference for ugly incident wherever possible. There is one gentleman in the story, and that is Christopher Dysart, who is drawn with considerable skill and perception, but even he must have a senile lunatic for a father. . . . The amours are mean, the people mostly repulsive, and the surroundings depressing."

Yet these very qualities, when rescued from pejorative construance, are just what helps make *The Real Charlotte* such a powerful novel. The late Terence de Vere White, writing in the *Irish Times*, provokes a comparison between it and Joyce's masterpiece: "Leaving the huge whale—*Ulysses*—basking off-shore, what better Irish novel is there than *The Real Charlotte*?" Somerville & Ross were too grounded in the mud and stables and kitchens of country life to be tempted by Joyce's flirtations with classical myth—and perhaps, unlike Joyce, they were too satisfied with the life they led to go looking for the extra dimension that myth added to his view of urban Irish life during the same period. Otherwise, what these two novels have decisively in common is a vigorous realism, in strong reaction to the sentimentality and florid rhetoric of the nineteenth-century Irish tradition—which Yeats only escaped when he was hit over the head by modernism.

The realism that offended the genteel literary establishment of their time may be traced to Somerville & Ross's knowledge of all levels of Irish society. As I have pointed out, big house life in Ireland was not really very grand: the Anglo-Irish had few Bridesheads to boast of. Master and servant lived on terms of mutual interdependency and even intimacy. Gifford Lewis comments: "Hildegarde's Bridget Driscoll and Gungie Minehan, and Edith's Mike Hurley, were members of the household in a way inexplicable to English visitors. Edith once

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turned her rage on a Drishane house guest because she had 'treated Mike like a servant.'" Their intimacy with the female side of below-stairs life added another dimension for the cousins' fiction:

> Edith and Martin happened to be in many unusual places and wrote about aspects of Irish life previously unseen or unnoticed by the centre-stage male; they enjoyed laundries, kitchens, boot cupboards, ashpits—in short, places frequented by servants, most of whom were women. . . . It was the authors' familiarity with the poor, poverty, dirt and ugliness that repelled many readers of *Charlotte*.

For readers who fall under the spell of Somerville & Ross's world, the continuity between actual and fictional realms provides many little pleasures. The saga of a mother cat named Jubila and her kittens, recounted in Violet Martin's letters, which coincides with Martin's and her mother's efforts to reclaim and refurbish Ross House after having lived away from it for years, makes very clear how heavily her fiction drew on daily life, and how thoroughly the wit in the stories represented the wit of the letter-writer (as well as adumbrating an attitude that today would be called elitist):

> The cat, being in labour, selected as her refuge the old oven in the corner of the kitchen, a bricked cavern, warm, lofty, and secluded. Here among bottles, rags, and other concealments she nourished and brought up her young in great calm till the day that Andy set to work at the kitchen chimney. . . . I was fortunately pervading space on that day, and came in time to see a dense black cloud issuing from the oven mouth. I yelled to a vague assembly of Bridgets in the servants hall, all of whom were sufficiently dirty to bear a little more without injury. . . . For the rest of the day Jubila cleaned herself with her children in the coldest parts of the house, with ostentatious fury and frump . . .

It is not far, as the imagination flies, from the kitchen at Ross to Tally Ho, the residence of Charlotte Mullen. The Tally Ho kitchen, of which the authors write with an almost perceptible shudder, is a species of that minor hell of squalor and disorder that seems to lie in wait for the Protestant middle-class whenever it loses its tenuous grip on respectability. It is the same hell that figures today in the fearful imaginations of the Rev. Ian Paisley and his constituents. Here Charlotte's servant, Norry the Boat, sulks and grumbles against her mistreatment by her mistress while the omnipresent cats roam where they will:

> The objects in the kitchen were scarcely more than visible in the dirty lights of a hanging lamp, and the smell of paraffin filled the air. . . . A door at the end of the kitchen opened into a scullery of the usual prosaic, not to say odorous kind, which was now a cavern of darkness, traversed by twin green stars that moved to and fro as the lights move on a river at night, and looked like anything but what they were, the eyes of cats prowling around a scullery sink.

Another world that Somerville & Ross knew about was a Dublin occupied not by the desperately poor, but by those lower-middle-class Protestant clerical workers and minor office functionaries who clung to the coattails of the professions, government, and commerce. When Violet Martin's mother closed Ross House in the early 1870s and took her five daughters to the capital so that they could go to school and meet Dublin society, the young Martin got some taste of a city that must have seemed very much a backwater, particularly in summer, when those who could afford it had gone away to the seashore or the country. Francie Fitzpatrick, the orphaned heroine of the book, who later has the fatal ill luck to get between Charlotte and her goals, lives here with her aunt and uncle. This is the scene on which *The Real Charlotte* opens:

> An August Sunday afternoon in the north side of Dublin. Epitome of all that is hot, arid, and empty. Tall brick houses, browbeating

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> each other in gloomy respectability across the white streets; broad pavements, promenaded mainly by the nomadic cat; stifling squares, wherein the infant of unfashionable parentage is taken for the daily baking that is its substitute for the breezes and the press of perambulators on the Bray Esplanade or the Kingston pier.

Later in the novel, Francie returns to Dublin in disgrace after her flirtation with the caddish English officer Hawkins in the more elevated society of Lismoyle, where her cousin Charlotte lives. Francie's aunt and uncle have now come down even further in the world and are living in Bray, in a shabby little house which was "just saved from the artisan level by a tiny bow window on either side of the hall door, and the name, Albatross Villa, painted on the gateposts." If genius is attention to detail, the firm of Somerville & Ross never disappoints the reader in the deployment of little touches like "Uncle Robert, arranging a greasy satin tie under his beard at the looking glass, preparatory to catching the 8:30 train to Dublin" and "the fact that Bridget put on the coal with her fingers was recorded on the edges of the plates."

The center of the novel—the center of its action and of the book's moral questioning—is Charlotte Mullen, whom we first meet on the night her aunt dies at Tally Ho, the house she is to inherit from the old lady. "Probably at no moment of her forty years of life had Miss Charlotte Mullen looked more startlingly plain than now, as she stood, her squat figure draped in a magenta flannel dressing gown." At once it is established how unattractive Charlotte is, how intelligent, and how capable:

> Charlotte took the tiny wrist in her hand, and felt the pulse with professional attention. Her broad, perceptive finger-tips gauged the forces of the little thread that was jerking in the tin network of tendons, and as she laid the hand down she said to herself, "She'll not last out the turn of the night."

"Where's little Francie? You mustn't send her away, Charlotte; you promised you'd take care of her; didn't you, Charlotte?" are old Mrs. Mullen's dying words. "'Yes, yes,' said Charlotte quickly . . . 'never fear, I'll see after her;'" Charlotte replies—a deathbed pledge that bitterly foreshadows the plot of the novel, because Charlotte's machinations result in the ruination and death of her young cousin. Of the house she inherits, Julian Moynahan points out astutely in his new book, *Anglo-Irish: the Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture*, "The house name, from the place Violet Martin stayed during her first visit to Castletownshend, is perfect for conveying the note of false heartiness and cheer that Charlotte often sounds in company, especially among her equals and betters."

What makes Charlotte so compelling a character is that physically and morally unattractive as she may be, she is at the same time impressively capable in practical matters, as well as being the intellectual superior of everyone else in the book:

> Her neighbours never forgot to mention, in describing her, the awe-inspiring fact that she "took in the English *Times* and the *Saturday Review*, and read every word of them," but it was hinted that the bookshelves that her own capable hands had put up in her bedroom held a large proportion of works of fiction of a startlingly advanced kind, "and," it was generally added in tones of mystery, "many of them French."

Charlotte was evidently modeled on a distant cousin of Edith's who had cheated her out of an inheritance, and for the book's authors the key to her motivation was the maxim, "Hell holds no fury like a woman scorned"—a maxim she demonstrates, chillingly, in several different instances. For years Charlotte has been carrying a torch for Roddy Lambert, estate agent for the aristocratic Dysart family—a position Charlotte's father had held. Lambert, having started out as Charlotte's father's protégé, has over the years been Charlotte's as well.

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She has lent him money, given him advice, and collaborated with him on business deals. There are hints of an earlier flirtation between the two of them, before Roddy married "the turkey-hen" for her money. Roddy is not shy about using his masculine charms to their full advantage, as is clear from this interchange between them on the possibility of his stabling horses on a small estate belonging to the Dysarts called Gurthnamuckla, which she might take over if a way can be found of evicting its current tenant:

> "Well, if you'll get me Gurthnamuckla," said Charlotte with a laugh, in which nervousness was strangely apparent, "you may buy up every young horse in the country and stable them in the parlour, so long as you'll leave the attics for me and the cats."
>
> Lambert turned his head upon its cushion, and looked at her.
>
> "I think I'll leave you a little more space than that, Charlotte, if ever we stable our horses together."
>
> She glanced at him, as aware of the double entendre, and as stirred by it as he had intended her to be. Perhaps a little more than he had intended . . .

Charlotte's ruthlessness is startling, and the aggregate effect of it takes the reader by surprise, because the authors narrate each action she takes in such an understated manner. Having managed, as the book opens, to inherit her aunt's property by promising to take care of young Francie, she succeeds in triggering a heart attack in Lambert's first wife, by agitating the sickly "turkey-hen" when she tells her of Lambert's infatuation with the beautiful young Francie. While Mrs. Lambert collapses, calling out for her "drops," Charlotte does nothing—instead seizing the opportunity occasioned by the woman's unconsciousness to read, propelled by her obsessive jealousy, Lambert's love letters to Francie. Death held a powerful fascination for Violet Martin, and one can detect her hand in this description of Charlotte's reaction:

> She dropped on her knees beside the motionless, tumbled figure on the floor. "She's dead! she's dead!" she cried out, and as if in protest against her own words she flung water upon the unresisting face, and tried to force the drops between the closed teeth. But the face never altered; it only acquired momentarily the immovable placidity of death, that asserted itself in silence, and gave the feeble features a supreme dignity, in spite of the thin dabbled fringe and the gold ear-rings and brooch, that were instinct with the vulgarities of life.

Several more chilling opportunities remain for "the real Charlotte" to emerge from beneath the comfortable persona she presents to the world of a provincial Irish town in late Victorian times. Later, in the triumphant comedies of the Irish R.M. stories, which would make the firm of Somerville & Ross an Anglo-Irish icon, the two cousins hit on a mode that hid social truths beneath caricature and accommodation. But in *The Real Charlotte*, in their thirties, they managed to touch, uncomfortably, the quick of Irish life at a time of cataclysmic change.

Are distinguished works of art more likely to occur—as received opinion has it—in moments of social tranquility than in times of turmoil and transition? Or, on the other hand, has the world ever seen an age that was not an age of transition? Whatever nostalgia she and her collaborator may have felt toward what Martin called "the quietness of untroubled centuries" in Ireland, their genius lay in evoking the strains of the transitional times in which they lived, when the Protestant Ascendancy of their own class was well on its way to extinction. I don't recall a single letter or diary entry suggesting that these two women set out to write "political" books. It may simply be that, caught up as they were in the great social changes that characterized their time, they could not do otherwise.

Their major characters are all trying to get on, and, if possible, to rise through the shifting currents of change in their country: Lambert, whose "raw Limerick brogue"

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seeps into his accent in moments of stress; Francie, who Christopher Dysart thinks "must be a nice girl somehow not to have been more vulgar than she was"; even Captain Hawkins, infatuated with Francie but feeling compelled to marry a boring English girl for her money. And especially the real Charlotte, whose father was a land agent but who is moved to say to Christopher Dysart, "your poor father would tell you if he was able, that the Butlers of Tally Ho were as well known in their time as the Dysarts of Bruff!" "Yes, indeed," she goes on to add:

> "as good a family as any in the country. People laugh at me, and say I'm mad about family and pedigree; but I declare to goodness, Mr Dysart, I think the French are right when they say, '*bong song ne poo mongtir*,' and there's nothing like good blood after all."

I wonder whether Conor Cruise O'Brien's disapproving assessment of Somerville & Ross, quoted earlier, is quite fair. To hold them to the democratic views of our own age would be to require from these turn-of-the-century women attitudes that in their own times would have seemed utopian and bizarrely unrealistic. Certainly, however class-conscious they were, they were also aware how deeply implicated they and their characters—beneficiaries and victims of the English conquest of the island—were in the ironies and tragedies of Irish history. Francie is thrown from her horse and killed when she and her English officer blunder into a Catholic funeral procession. This happens because "heedless of the etiquette that required that she and Hawkins should stop their horses till the funeral passed," she rides in among the mourners. Just before, startled by the "Irish Cry" of ritual mourning, her horse throws her and breaks her neck, "The faces in the carts were all turned upon her, and she felt as if she were enduring, in a dream, the eyes of an implacable tribunal."

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Poems *by Donald Justice, William Craig Rice & Charles Tomlinson*

A man of 1794

And like a discarded statue, propped up in a cart,
He is borne along toward the page allotted to him in history.

To open his heavy-lidded eyes now would be merely
To familiarize himself with the banal and destined route.

He is aware of the mockery of the streets,
But does not understand it. It hardly occurs to him

That what they fear is that he might yet address them
And call them back to their inflamed duty.

But this he cannot do; the broken jaw prevents speech.
Today he will not accuse the accusers; it is perhaps all that saves them.

Meanwhile his head rocks back and forth loosely on his chest
With each new jolt and lurch of the endless-seeming street:

Impossible to resist this idiot shaking.
—But it is hard after all to sympathize

With a man formerly so immaculate,
Who, after a single night of ambiguous confinement,

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Lets go all pride of appearance. Nevertheless,
Under the soiled jabot, beneath the stained blue coat,

Are the principles nothing has shaken. Rousseau was right,
Of that he is still convinced: *Man is naturally good!*

And in the moment before the blade eases his pain
He thinks perhaps of his dog or of the woods at Choissy,

Some thought in any case of a perfectly trivial nature,
As though already he were possessed of a sweet, indefinite leisure.

—*Donald Justice*

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Baroque

What is it makes her eyes change like this
when guitar music slips through the air,
as if the music and her irises share
some pulse? "It is direct and crisp,"

she says, "like no other instrument.
These are fingerprinted sounds." Her dress
is long, her face and limbs are motionless,
a figure in daguerreotype, an ornament

returned to weary life from the mantel.
I take her hand. We're only twenty-six,
marooned in modernity, transfixed
by ancient melodies, pre-romantic.

We cannot marry or even love
in earnest. A century ago, or two,
we never would have doubted who
we were. She asks, "Who's the composer of

this piece?" It's ending. "Only says
'Anonymous.' Composers didn't matter."
"Just like today," she says. And laughter,
beginning in our eyes, breaks the malaise.

—*William Craig Rice*

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Olympia

in dispraise of ruins

That intelligent lizard
knows more of the place than I do. To him
all this is a city still complete,
its every fissure leads
into sunlit avenue, shadowy retreat.
I approve of his ignorance of archeology:
I, too, cannot read a ruin with ease.
For him, of course, the question does not arise.
What Greece lacks is buildings that are entire.
Not those drab towns or these chipped remains,
It is architecture that I admire.
A true building builds you up as you look at it.
The pleasures of ruins are not infinite.

—*Charles Tomlinson*

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Art

Serious matter

by Mario Naves

If there are artists whose work is incapable of crossing the borders of international taste, then the Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies is not one of them. Based in Barcelona, Tàpies (b. 1923) has been cited along with Picasso and Miró as one of his country's premier modernists. He has achieved a worldwide recognition that few living artists can claim, and his work is not unknown in New York, where he has exhibited regularly since his 1953 debut at the Martha Jackson Gallery. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the art world will find his work familiar and, perhaps, prescient. Tàpies's paintings of the Fifties and Sixties, for instance, can bring to mind the Neo-Expressionism of the Eighties. A case can be made for Tàpies being ahead of his time. Taking into account the nature of his influence, however, one wonders just how much such an accolade is worth.

For although there are fifty-six objects spanning almost fifty years in "Tàpies," the first full-scale presentation of his work seen in the United States since 1977, it is not so much an exhibition of art as a display of ego.[1] There have always been painters and sculptors who have thought highly of their own talents, of course, and not a few were great artists—one shudders at the thought of a civilization bereft of them. It is one thing, however, to be an artist like, say, Picasso, whose sizable ego was occasioned—and, more often than not, surpassed—by similarly proportioned gifts. It is quite another to believe one's own press releases. I doubt very much that Tàpies reads his press releases at this date, but anyone leaving "Tàpies" will be convinced of the certitude he has in his own artistic prowess, a certitude that is not borne out by the work on view.

Tàpies garnered notoriety in the Fifties with his "matter" paintings. Large and emphatically physical canvases, they are layered with paint, sand, and marble dust and then incised, scraped, and pierced. Tàpies scratches into these surfaces forms that recall hieroglyphics, calligraphy, and graffiti. These works can border on relief sculpture, and their colors are dry and gritty—blacks, browns, grays, and rusts predominate. The matter paintings share affinities with other art of the time, particularly Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel. But the strongest influence on Tàpies may have been the *art brut* of Jean Dubuffet. Tàpies shares the Frenchman's fascination with the untutored

1 "Tàpies" opened at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, on January 27, 1995, and remains on view through April 23. The show was organized by Carmen Giménez, with the collaboration of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; a somewhat different version was seen last year at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (September 27–December 4, 1994). A catalogue, with an essay by Dore Ashton, has been published by the Guggenheim/Harry N. Abrams (229 pages, $50; paper $35).

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vitality of graffiti, as well as with the weathered surfaces of the city; Tàpies has referred to his paintings as "walls." But he has neither Dubuffet's sensitivity for surface nor his sense of humor. A Dubuffet-ish work like *Nude* (1966)—a mottled blot of a woman riddled with marks, letters, and smudges—has a lot going on in it, but it doesn't add up to much. Tàpies's scribbles seem arbitrary—there's no pictorial reasoning to them. Dubuffet defined the ground of his paintings with a crotchety line and an all-over surface texture. In comparison, Tàpies merely scrawls on his canvases with the hope that something worthwhile will emerge.

Despite their gestural brutality and buckled surfaces, however, the matter paintings are tepid; their ferocity is secondhand. Attempting to evoke the rawness of graffiti found on city walls, Tàpies copies the wall instead of embodying the unhewn energy that attracted him to it in the first place. There's no intrinsic life to his work; Tàpies is so in thrall to the idea of art that he cannot get beyond literal transcription. When he wants us to feel the weight of history, for instance, he scratches a triangle and some hasty glyphs into an encrusted canvas, titles it *Pyramid*, and thus, presumably, summons us before the glories of ancient Egypt. Tàpies trades in romantic banalities. In a sense, he's too polite for his own good, and Dubuffet, at his best, was scarcely that.

The chief liability of Tàpies's work relates to the idea of the "wall" in another way. For Tàpies, the flat surface of the canvas is just that: flat. He is too much of a materialist to believe in painting as a vehicle for metaphor achieved through illusion. Tàpies never sees into his canvases and there is little space or light to speak of in his work. Consequently, Tàpies abjures painting for its (to borrow that burnished buzzword of the times) simulacrum. Of course, this is not a characteristic unique to Tàpies. Artists such as Robert Ryman and Cy Twombly practice what could best be termed "ersatz painting"—they offer the look of painting, if not its actuality. And so it is with Tàpies. For whatever else it may be, his work—with its scale, physicality, and expressionist agitation—looks like it should be art. This may be the reason why otherwise sensible people, like catalogue essayist Dore Ashton, admire his work: it has the appearance of significance.

The surfaces of Tàpies's canvases, then, serve solely as a base on which to pile detritus. And pile it on he does. By the late Sixties and early Seventies, Tàpies began affixing buckets, bags of hay, rope, belt buckles, hooks, and a variety of other objects to his paintings. One fancies that this was done in the hope of transcending (as the artist put it) "the excesses of abstract art," as if pasting on tangible objects did not risk its own variety of overkill. Yet, Tàpies is also something of a mystic and has stated that his aim is to induce a meditative state in the viewer. In other words, he's a materialist, but he wants his spirituality (or anti-tangibility) too. But there's no magic to Tàpies's work; his objects sit dumbly on the surface of the canvas. His painting is slapdash stuff and, boy, is it *serious*. (At least Robert Rauschenberg, whatever his merits as an artist, had *fun* putting his assemblages together.) Yet, it's hard to tell what Tàpies is so serious about.

Or maybe it's too easy. *Painting with an Ironing Board* (1970) combines an ironing board, a piece of cloth, and a small mirror on a ground splattered with paint and sand. Tàpies arranges these items in a vaguely iconic manner, but there's no sense of transformation to it. He doesn't—or can't—let his objects carry their own metaphorical weight. Tàpies has no faith in their allusive capabilities, and how compelling is a mystic who doesn't have faith in something larger than himself? One suspects that these works are intended to connect by force of will, what Tàpies calls the "artist's magic prestige." But will alone never put rubbish over on its own terms and Tàpies attempts at transcendence are woefully earthbound.

If Tàpies's early work was ahead of its time, then his paintings of the Eighties and

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Nineties poke along behind it. They are reminiscent, in no small way, of Miró's misguided attempts at outdoing the Abstract Expressionists. In Tàpies's case, it's depressing seeing him trying to catch up with, of all people, Julian Schnabel. (Talk about cultural de-evolution.) Immense in scale—woe to the museum having to store these mammoths!—the recent work is reliably bombastic but it does ease up a bit; it provides more to look at if only because there isn't as much stuff in the way. Here Tàpies's use of materials becomes less monotonous as does the oppressive physicality of the paintings. (The vacuum-like sweep of the SoHo Guggenheim's galleries helps the work along as well.) The paintings are still hodgepodges of stains, scribbles, objects, and graffiti, but better sloppy vulgarity than portentous *gravitas*, if not by much.

The finest pieces on view in "Tàpies" predate the matter paintings. *Silver Paper Collage* and *Figure of Newsprint and Threads*, both from 1946, are somewhat pedestrian neo-Surrealist collages that nevertheless engage the viewer by inviting him to look closely. *Silver Paper Collage*, in particular, with its tracery of threads, reveals Tàpies's debt to Miró in a way that is affecting. Even so, its memory all but pales in the face of what I consider the quintessential Tàpies painting. *Infinity* (1988) is a gray and grainy surface with the word "*INFINIT*" incised in layers along all four edges of the painting, as if simplistic scrawls could conjure up an endless horizon of spiritual inquiry. Here, Tàpies relies on chutzpah and chutzpah alone, and it isn't enough. He's playing the artist as seer, presenting us with a philosopher's stone predigested for easy consumption and, much to his unimagined chagrin, easy to disregard. Tàpies's work may not be conceptual art as we have come to know it, but its limitations are related and no amount of "magic prestige" will save it from being overheated and facile. If, indeed, Picasso, Miró, and Tàpies form the holy trinity of Spanish modernism, then "Tàpies" reveals that some artists are holier than others.

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Music

Webern after Webernism

by Tim Page

It is almost fifty years since Anton Webern was shot and killed in a freakish accident in the aftermath of World War II. From this vantage point, Webern now seems one of those profound and original artists (James Joyce is another) whose work remains not only valuable but, for many of us, positively *essential*, yet whose influence has been baleful and sometimes ruinous to the numerous young artists who have attempted to follow in his steps.

Has any great composer ever been done so much harm by disciples and admirers? Here is Paul Griffiths, far from the worst of them, writing on Webern's use of serialism in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

> Linking serial forms through common terminals is a frequent practice in Webern from Opus 21 onwards, but the shared notes are most usually one or two in number; this technique may limit, of course, the range of serial statements that can be chosen to follow a given form . . . It should be noted that the three serial forms there shown are in the relation of prime tetrachordal combinatoriality: i.e., a 12-note aggregate is formed by all of the first or second or third tetrachords. However, Webern did not normally make explicit use of the combinatorial relations in which his symmetrical series are rich . . .

Sexy stuff—makes you want to run right out and buy all the Webern in the shop, doesn't it? It is not to Griffiths's attempt at explaining a complicated musical procedure that I object; it's rather to the fact that, here as in so much of the other writing on Webern—and certainly in most of the composition that claims to be "post-Webernian"—there is the implication that the curious ordering games he played are the most important thing about his work.

Worse, however, is the ferocious, near-Marxian self-righteousness in the claims of the ardent Webernians, some of whom trotted out the blood-soaked chimera of "historical inevitability." Here, for example, is the young Pierre Boulez: "History is much like the guillotine. If a composer is not moving in the right direction, he will be killed, metaphorically speaking." And, on another occasion, Boulez referred to twelve-tone music as "a music of our time, a language with unlimited possibilities. *No other language was possible*." (Italics mine.)

Yes, there was certainly a lot of ugly, formula-driven music written, explained, and justified in the name of Anton Webern. His imitators borrowed all his tricks—the spare, elegant orchestration; the long silences; the will-to-order—but captured none of his magic. I suspect that ultimately this composer will be remembered as an inspired, brilliantly talented eccentric—one of those occasional figures in the history of music who, like Berlioz, Busoni, Pfitzner, or the later Richard Strauss, will always stand a step away from whatever passes as the main-

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stream. Webernism is dead, but Webern lives.

New York recently had the opportunity to reappraise virtually all of Webern's music when Joel Sachs and the Juilliard School presented a series of evenings called "Focus! The Webern Legacy." I attended the first of these concerts, which was, unfortunately, underrehearsed and not particularly idiomatic (my sources tell me later installments were much better). Still, the program prompted me to take down the two more-or-less "complete" recordings of Webern's work (set down by Robert Craft in the early Fifties and Boulez in the Seventies), along with a more recent pairing of orchestral music by Webern and Mozart played by the Cleveland Orchestra, under Christoph von Dohnányi.[1] And then, fortified with scores, Sachs's superb program notes, and the vast Webern biography by Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer,[2] I played every Webern recording in my collection and discovered, once again, that this is a composer that I not only esteem but love.

Can one "love" Webern in the same manner one "loves" Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or Chopin, with heart as well as head? I think so. For while it may be helpful for a professional musician to analyze Webern's tone rows, sets, and subsets, the lay listener need not know or care what compositional techniques Webern was using in a given measure any more than it is necessary to understand Bach's complicated and remarkable employment of canonic forms to enjoy his "Goldberg" Variations. What matters is the sounding music—and Webern *sounds*.

Indeed, it might be argued that there has been no more specific aural creator than Anton Webern. By this, I mean that his mature compositions are absolutely mated to the forces for which they are scored: change the orchestration—even slightly—and you change the music. In this way, Webern is the opposite of Bach, whose music survives all sorts of transcription. (I have heard stimulating performances of *The Art of Fugue* on harpsichord, piano, organ, arranged for brass ensemble, saxophone quartet, and full symphony orchestra; Bach himself was quite content to take a violin concerto and transpose it down a step to create a keyboard concerto.)

With Webern, no such tinkering is possible. One of his most famous works is the tiny vignette that makes up the fourth of the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, op. 10; it is scored for nine instruments and is only about twenty seconds long. Transcribed for piano, this would be rendered gibberish; played on any other instruments, it would be a different piece. The sound *is* the music: the trumpet has its four notes to play, the solo violin its five, the snare drum gives a rattle, and the piece is over, yet the subsceptive listener will recognize that he has undoubtedly *heard* something. Webern called this symbiotic ordering of sound and pitch *Klangfarbenmelodie*—melody of tone colors—and he would develop it to his own pristine, platonic ideal of perfection.

Webern wrote these *Five Pieces* in 1910, at about the same time and in the same place Mahler was finishing up the last of his symphonies. Webern admired Mahler—some of Webern's compositions could have been boiled down from the quieter interludes in the late Mahler symphonies—but his own work represents the antithesis of Mahlerism in Viennese music. The difference is not simply one of length—Mahler's shortest symphony is almost an hour long; Boulez's recording of Webern's only symphony clocks in at nine minutes—but also one of mood and manner.

There is an unintentionally hilarious article by Leonard Bernstein that credits poor Mahler with having foreseen almost every disaster that has hit the twentieth century, including "the murder in Dallas, the arro-

1 Robert Craft's Webern is on Columbia Masterworks LP K4L-232 (4 discs), and Boulez's on CBS Masterworks LP M4 35193 (4 discs) and SONY Classical CD SM3K 45845 (3 CDs). The Cleveland Orchestra recording is London CD 436 421-2 (3 CDs).

2 *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work*, by Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer; Knopf, 1979.

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gance of South Africa, the Hiss–Chambers travesty"—I am *not* making this up—"the Trotskyite purges, Black Power, Red Guards, the Arab encirclement of Israel, the plague of McCarthyism, the Tweedledum armaments race." "Only after all this can we finally listen to Mahler's music and understand that it foretold all," Bernstein concluded.

Metaphysical twaddle aside, I think most of us would agree that there is a strong element of *angst* in Mahler's music—and in the music of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, the two other members (with Webern) of the so-called "second Viennese school" that, to some extent, grew out of Mahler. But, with the exception of a terrifying funeral march he wrote in memory of his mother (one of the *Orchestral Pieces*, op. 6), there is very little *angst* in Webern—and certainly no gift of prophecy. Roger Sessions used to say that music was "beyond" emotion. This is not necessarily true of the music of all composers (nor would it be any sort of blessing if it was), but I think it *is* mostly true of Webern; listening to the best of his music may be likened to a visit from some gentle, benign alien who has taken over the room to shimmer at us for a while.

Robert Craft's four-record set of Webern's music was a labor of love, recorded in a hurry, and full of technical flaws (Craft himself apologized for the performance of the Concerto, op. 24, in his liner notes); given the bottom-line mentality that prevails in the record industry, it is unlikely to be reissued on compact disc any time soon. However, for almost a quarter century, this was the only access most listeners had to Webern's musical world (I carried the set around like holy writ all through my fifteenth and sixteenth years) and it certainly deserves consideration in any discussion of the composer.

And there are some solid merits in the recording. Marni Nixon (who is probably best known for her work dubbing the film-score of *My Fair Lady* for Audrey Hepburn) had a high, bright, dryly attractive soprano voice and she sang her numerous parts with intelligence and musicianship. That "eminent Schoenbergian," Leonard Stein of the University of Southern California, brought a sure, idiomatic command to the keyboard music, both solo and ensemble, and many distinguished session players—something of a Who's Who of the mid-Fifties L.A. freelancers—joined in the endeavor.

Craft's conducting has come in for some negative comment over the years. There is no doubt that he emphasizes the dissonances and modernist rough edges in Webern's music, gleefully pouncing on the "wrong notes" as if he simply couldn't wait to disturb the complacency of his audience; this composer would never again sound so ferocious. Yet the greatness of Craft's accomplishment cannot be denied. Less than ten years after Webern's death, with most of the music unknown except to the most specialized of specialists, Craft convinced Columbia Masterworks to take a gamble on a four-record set and then, somehow, pulled it together, creating—from scratch, as it were—his own understanding of Webern, conveying it to his musicians and, by extension, to the world. How many recordings have changed so many lives? It has been said of the American rock group the Velvet Underground that only a few people bought their albums but each and every one of them went out and formed a band; Craft's Webern had a similar galvanizing effect on a generation of young composers.

By 1979, when CBS Masterworks (the heir to Columbia Masterworks and the predecessor to today's SONY Classical) brought out Pierre Boulez's Webern set, everything had changed. Webernism had grown from an esoteric cult into an institutionalized tradition, with manifestations throughout the music world. The Webernian mavericks, grown up and grown sober, were now entrenched in the conservatories and music schools, juggling their charts, balancing their canons, disseminating their theories, blowing the (muted, *pianissimo*) trumpet of Anton Webern and, in more than a few cases, fashioning some of the dreariest music ever written, all in the master's name.

And so Boulez's recording came as a dif-

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ferent sort of revelation. Boulez, the frosty, hyper-cerebral structuralist—whose pronouncements had done more than anything else to establish meticulously organized Webernism as a secular religion—surprised us with interpretations of a startling and radiant beauty, prismatic in their timbres, sometimes achingly reminiscent of the milieu that had formed Webern's aesthetic. Suddenly it was possible to recognize in Webern's music a man who grew up in a unified and conservative musical environment, a man who adored (indeed, conducted and even *transcribed*) the work of Johann Strauss—in short, a true son of Vienna.

Curiously, the Boulez set—which remains the essential Webern collection and is now available on compact disc from SONY—helped bury strict, by-the-numbers Webernism, for the performances were so lovely and lyrical that we were presented with a fresh vantage point on Webern. Suddenly, he was a *composer* again, with his own endearing quirks and mannerisms, rather than a mathematical pedant or an all-knowing Cassandra, laying down the law. A younger group of musicians, weaned from any mystical faith in empirical "progress," was less interested in Webern's formulas than in his sound. We listened to Webern, and, by and large, we revered him, but he was no longer the man who had divined the "only possible" musical language for our times; we no longer believed that tonality was necessarily "dead"; we had no use for codes that would supposedly ensure "correct" compositional procedures; we loved many of the manifestations of early-twentieth-century Vienna but no longer thought they had a great deal to "teach" late-twentieth-century America.

In the meantime, there had been a revival of interest in the work of such men as Richard Strauss and Jean Sibelius, both written off as hopelessly old-fashioned during the Fifties and Sixties. Of the three works of *circa*-1910 modernism that have often (and rightly) been hailed as seminal—*Elektra*, *Rite of Spring*, and *Pierrot Lunaire*—only *Elektra*, created by the derided "reactionary" of the bunch, retained the power to shock an audience speechless in the 1980s. We encountered the Sibelius Fourth Symphony—unknown and untaught to most composition students for many years—and found it as elliptical and enigmatic as anything by Webern, while radically different in its form and expression. We listened to American masters and near-masters, without apology or embarrassment. In short, we discovered that Webern was not the One True Faith his acolytes had proclaimed but, rather, a wonderfully original, exquisitely distilled and enormously distinctive voice among many—a voice that would always find listeners, even amidst the chaos and raucous diversity of our era. And that is enough.

The "mainstreaming" of Anton Webern continues, at least on disc. Recently, the Cleveland Orchestra issued a three-CD set devoted to the last six symphonies of Mozart, with several orchestral pieces by Webern to round things out. It might not be the pairing of a Mozartean's dreams, but conductor Dohnányi's graceful, clear and acutely nuanced performances, realized with his magnificent orchestra, illuminate textures, subtleties, and continuities in this music that even Boulez sometimes missed. Musicologists used to profess bewilderment at what one writer called Webern's "gnomic, overdelicate puzzle-music"; much of that puzzle now seems to have been in the performances and, as those performances improve, the puzzle would seem much closer to solution.

It should be noted that Craft, Boulez, and Dohnányi have all excluded *Im Sommerwind* from their surveys. This is a student work from 1904, never published during Webern's lifetime, and it proves nothing more than the fact that the composer could write thoroughly conventional, triadic, Austrian "nature music" (chirping birdies in the woodwinds, a dawn-to-dusk programmatic subtext) when he wanted to. Yet, in the past dozen years, I have probably heard *Im Sommerwind* more often in New York concert halls than any other work by Webern

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(trotted out as if to show that this guy could really *compose* when he wanted to, in the same manner that the seriousness of abstract Picasso used to be "proven" by examples of his early, representational draftsmanship). Clearly, Webern's mature language remains daunting to many audiences—and, more important, to the timid presenters and marketers who, increasingly, set our artistic agenda.

I hope this will change as dogmatic post-Webernism recedes into memory and as we grow more familiar with the music itself—the Symphony, with its lambent sonic auroras and balletic grace; the vocal melodies in the cantatas, with their demands for singers who can leap about the staff with the surety of a mountain goat; the pinpoint clarity of the orchestration, without a wasted gesture. Webern bears no responsibility for the excesses of his cult: he did not say (as did Schoenberg) that he had "ensured the primacy of German music for a hundred years," nor did this modest, retiring man make any claims for having discovered a new world for anybody but himself.

The Moldenhauers' biography is more impressive as a dogged marshaling of facts than as the living portrait of a man, but I've always liked what it has to say about the composer's love for mountaineering: "Webern was not a fanatic about attaining the highest point. His passion was not for conquest; he wished only to immerse himself in the wonders of nature and the stillness of the heights." We should approach Webern's music in the same spirit, with gratitude and affection.

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Theater

Royal treatments

by Mark Steyn

The film's the thing. But, for a motion-picture celebrity, nothing confers the prestige that a theatrical engagement does: it's "live," it's "dangerous," there's "nowhere to hide." To be—or merely to be screened: that is the question. Daniel Day-Lewis, one of Hollywood's fashionable contingent of rangey Anglo-Celts, opted for *Hamlet* at Britain's National Theatre and awakened so many long dormant feelings about his own father, the poet C. Day-Lewis, that he had a nervous breakdown. Moreover, the very fact of his nervous breakdown—which is mostly what anyone remembers about his Hamlet—is seen as a triumphant vindication of his decision to take the role: he confronted his demons! live on stage!—and you can't do that in *Look Who's Talking, Too*. Keanu Reeves emerged less scathed from his *Hamlet* but still with his status considerably enhanced: he was just some hugely wealthy Hollywood beefcake until he did Shakespeare . . . for Equity-minimum peanuts . . . in Winnipeg. Is Winnipeg a competitive market for Hamlets? No matter. Even as I write, yet another celluloid hunk is probably planning to do *Hamlet* in a hamlet.

In London, the latest *Hamlet* opened the same week as the film *Disclosure*: Demi Moore got better notices just for *turning up* at the first night of the Shakespeare in the East End than she did for her leading role in the movie. It's all so democratic: stars whose agents routinely demand on their behalf top billing and executive-producer credit are suddenly happy to take their place among the third spear-carrier and fifth serving-wench in the strictly alphabetical ensemble listing. This is *Cinderella* in reverse: you *shall* go to the scullery, Prince Charming—but don't worry, at midnight your pumpkin will turn back into the Imperial State Coach.

In this respect, Matthew Broderick has missed the point. He's getting a pile of dough to do Frank Loesser on Broadway, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. But, for movie boys treading the boards, the trick is How to Succeed in Show Business *With* Really Trying: weeping, wailing, eye-rolling, breast-beating, all the things you can't do on screen (unless it's a remake of *The Jolson Story*) come spectacularly into their own. When a stage star travels the other way—to Hollywood—we don't get all this stuff about "emotionally exhausting," "pushing the limits," etc. It's taken for granted that they're doing it for a lark or the loot. Fiona Shaw, an electrifying Electra and Hedda on the London stage, occasionally does some bit of cine-fluff, such as flirting with Tom Selleck in *Three Men and a Little Lady*—and, at the end of each day, she tells me, she and the director sit around and talk about *anything* to avoid discussing the ridiculous piffle they're making their living from. But I love the way the great movie actors—Cagney and Bogart and Bette Davis and Cary Grant—never made any big deal about what they did and self-deprecatingly resisted any effort to analyze their work in

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terms of "bravery" or "courage": movie acting used to be cool. Hamlet is sweat and tears: no pain, no Dane.

Ralph Fiennes's is a familiar journey: after *Schindler's List* and *Quiz Show*, he has returned to the stage in an Almeida Theatre production sponsored by AT&T—a curious coupling, which, in the Seventies heyday of committed, co-operative, socialist fringe theater, would have been denounced by Almeida supporters as a wallow in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed; now, it brings them to the Belasco (from April 14) via the Hackney Empire. The Belasco is a good choice—technically a Broadway house but so long shuttered that it's untainted by modern Broadway associations and basks in a similarly faded glory as Frank Matcham's romantically dilapidated Empire. This, too, is part of the equation: the tattiness of the theater has to be roughly in proportion to the length of trailer the star can command in Hollywood.

Peter J. Davison's set is in the Almeida tradition but sits well in these crumbling barns. Chilly, cheerless walls relieved only by long, tall doors and shutters intersect on checkerboard flagstones: the squares, though, are not black or white but, like everything else, murky, weathered grays. Jonathan Kent's amazing concept seems to be to have no concept; instead, his production, lean and compressed, is almost subconsciously tuned to the play's original dynamic. Across the floor, with measured gait, move frock-coated courtiers, sashes and orders criss-crossing their chests: this is a confident, Edwardian court. Something may or may not be rotten in the state of Denmark, but there's no sense of crisis.

At the center glides Gertrude, majestically self-contained, frigidly elegant, but from her color-drained face flash fierce, glittering eyes. Francesca Annis reminds me here of a younger, pre-toque Queen Mary: an appropriate model, for on the sudden death of the Duke of Clarence—her fiancé and Britain's heir presumptive—in 1892, his younger brother, later King George V, stepped in to fulfill his sibling's obligations and married the then Princess Mary of Teck. The courtly presumption that a marriage contract is no more than a subclause of a wider political settlement held until well into our own time—and, by dressing the play at the pre-1914 apogee of the European Royal houses, Kent emphasizes only the normality of Elsinore. When James Laurenson's Claudius, smooth and relaxed, kisses Gertrude, it's purely a formality: she's part of the deal, she comes with the territory. The bland, collective unperturbability is not so remote, either—as anyone will attest who recalls the Tory grandees' behavior after their matricide of Mrs. Thatcher. But off in the shadows stands Fiennes: he has the unkempt coiffure and shapeless coat of a Hackney Social Security scrounger—which, in a court with as strict a dress code as this, really ought to be a giveaway; also, even though he has his back turned to his uncle, and step-father, and Sovereign Liege, he seems to be glaring through it. Kent's production starts like a thriller and, for much of the time, hurtles along at a killer pace. What follows in the next three hours, from Ophelia's descent into madness on, exposes the fatal flaw in monarchy: that no matter how prosperous and stable the state, one man can unravel the whole business.

Hamlet doesn't have to be about that, of course; it's about everything and, therefore, like W. S. Gilbert's House of Lords, it's about nothing in particular and does it very well. Every half-decent *Hamlet* should throw up some new insight, large or small. For example, because Fiennes is a hip Hamlet and his fans are young, we now see Shakespeare revealed as the author of the prototype *Wayne's World* gag: "Follow this lord," says the Prince of the departing Polonius, "and look you mock him." Pause. "Not." Big laugh. As to matters of more consequence, much of the above contemplation on monarchy was prompted by the presence, on the night I went to Hackney, of the Prince of Wales. Here, too, is a Crown Prince who, according to tabloid-received wisdom, is a bit of a wimp, has driven his gal

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to the edge and very nearly over it, and, if he's not "persuaded" to withdraw, will bring the whole edifice crashing down around him. (In my native land, some Parliamentarians recently mooted amending Canada's Oath of Citizenship to pledge allegiance to the Queen but to omit the reference to "her heirs and successors" on the grounds that, at this point, any sensible subject, however loyal, faced with the prospect of King Charles III, would wish to suspend judgment.) I wonder what His Royal Highness made of Tara Fitzgerald's Ophelia, who speaks her lines as if she's about to cut the ribbon at a new daycare center: either she's not a very good actress, or she's delivering a coruscating impression of an empty-headed Sloane trying to act like a Princess. I wonder also what the Prince made of the *Mousetrap* scene, the play-within-the-play within an even stranger additional layer: here was a real Royal watching play actors pretending to be real Royals watching other play actors pretending to be pretend play actors pretending to be real Royals. Here too, is a view of *Hamlet*: in this court, the play *is* the thing. Does Gertrude know that Claudius has offed her husband? Is Ophelia a bewildered virgin or a shrewd gold-digger? Who knows? Who cares? In this and in all Royal courts, what counts is that you know how to behave, how to *play*: the show must go on. Only Hamlet finds it hard to pitch his role.

This becomes explicit when the Prince borrows, from one of the visiting players, his grotesque white mask and garish orange robes. This is no disguise; it's to help goad himself into killing Claudius by transforming the hesitant Hamlet into an actor whose part requires he dispatch the usurper. The effect is spoiled by a lapse of staging: the gloomy, stifling shutters are thrown open and through a sunlit mullioned window Hamlet lurks, spying on his uncle. If he *is* play-acting, he seems to have wandered onto the set of a prewar drawing-room comedy. Shortly thereafter, a castle which has been conspicuously lacking in drapes and broadloom acquires a curtain, which appears to have been expressly installed so that Polonius can hide behind it and get stabbed. Here's a common defect of British classic reexaminations: the failure to follow the logic of your own interpretation: why couldn't Hamlet have, say, stabbed Polonius through the shutters? A sword can easily splinter wood, especially wood that looks as rotten as the state of Denmark is supposed to be. But, as soon as Polonius hits the floor and his killer starts doing his corpse knockabout, the tension bleeds out of the evening and we settle back to enjoy the jokes. Fortinbras arrives, and then the intermission, and the very short second act is like the perfunctory wrap-up of a dud musical, hurriedly tying up the loose ends, parsimonious about any new material and culminating in a bloody equivalent of one of those multiple wedding finales. What starts out so promisingly becomes an exercise in plot mechanics rather than character and emotions.

The blame for this has to be placed on Kent and Fiennes: if your interpretation won't support the drama, it's the wrong interpretation. Fiennes has won acclaim in Hollywood for two roles—the thin-lipped psychopathic camp commandant in *Schindler's List* and the coolly superior celebrity fraudster in *Quiz Show*. Both performances required accents—German, American—and they could easily have wound up as efficient British technician's work. Instead, both Steven Spielberg and Robert Redford drew from Fiennes readings full of intriguing ambiguities: they made a film star of him, with a face you can shoot in close-up, in repose, and whose expressionless mouth and passive eyes will still hold the screen. These performances derived their strength from their restraint and compression. Ignoring their lessons, Fiennes here is determined to be expansive and liberated. Of his previous stage work, I cannot recall him in the National's *Ting Tang Mine* or the RSC's *Man Who Came to Dinner*, but he was disappointing in *Much Ado About Nothing*. His first screen role was British—Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*: the windswept hair and designer stubble suggested Fiennes saw him as a moody rock

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star; instead, he came over like one of London's leather-clad motorcycle couriers and certainly had no connection with the source material, except insofar as, like a Brontë first edition, he was handsomely bound and exquisitely tooled.

We're back to the bedsit clichés for Fiennes's Hamlet. From that first encounter, when Hamlet alone has his back to Claudius, it's a performance of heavy indicating. Nobody turns his back on his Sovereign lightly: think of *The Madness of George III*, and Alan Bennett's vivid, theatrical exploitation of those moments when an equerry or physician fixes the King in his eye. Both plays are concerned with Royal madness, but, as George III realizes, it's not what you are but what you *seem* to be: "I have recovered how to seem," he says. You never feel such a recovery is within Hamlet's reach, because you never feel he ever understood. To be or seem to be: that's the real question. Is he a bona fide wacko or is he just putting on an "antic disposition"? As student princes go, Fiennes is light on the latter, heavy on the former: he expresses his desire for revenge by giving up footwear and embarrassing his parents. They and the court react with patronizing benevolence: just ignore him; hey, kids today, what do you expect? Most drama arouses your sense of moral indignation by focusing it in a sympathetic character. Shakespeare makes moral drama of unpromising material, of hard, flawed, repellent men. But Fiennes's Hamlet enters like a jerk and, because the other performances (save for some obligatory bits of incestuous French kissing) are so public and political, the effect is to make you see him, almost from the off, through Claudius's and Gertrude's and Polonius's eyes. This is no sweet prince, there is no sense of unfulfilled promise. When Fortinbras says, "For he was likely had he been put on to have proved most Royal," you scoff: "You should have got here at eight o'clock, pal." Any kingdom interested in self-preservation would get rid of this guy. I wonder if the Prince of Wales, who prefers *Henry V*, also came to this conclusion.

As you can tell, I'm having some difficulty untangling Kent's production from its Royal audience and imaging *Hamlet* without the Prince. Three nights later, at the Variety Arts on Third Avenue, I found myself across the aisle from an even more regal personage: Barbra Streisand. At the Empire, the tickets had stipulated "black tie"—so naturally the young lions of London theater in the audience had come along in their regulation sackcloth to show how unimpressed they were by their Royal guest; again, this mirrored Fiennes's sartorial disintegration on stage and unhappily exposed it as sham rebellion. By contrast, the Jewish-American Princess of Wails had chosen to come to the Variety Arts disguised as Yentl and was treated with a deference the Prince of Wales could only marvel at. These days, before Miss Streisand will enter a room, whether a marble-tiled bathroom in her hotel suite or Wembley Stadium, she insists that the whole place be carpeted from wall to wall. And, instead of going "Are you *nuts*?", we say, "Right away, Miss Streisand"—as we would have done a century ago with Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. I suppose, in that way, Fiennes's petulant-rock-star mannerisms *are* a contemporary equivalent to princes of the old order, but it is not even a *theoretically* noble burden, only a self-indulgent exhibitionism: by playing Hamlet as a sulky crank —a Piss-Artist Formerly Known as Prince— Fiennes diminishes the role. Prince only reduced his name to a squiggle; Hamlet reduces the entire court to a squiggle.

The Streisand comparison applies in another sense, too. Both Miss Streisand and Fiennes emphasize their specialness through exaggerated tempi. Some speeches Fiennes takes very emphatically: "Oh, that this *too* . . . *TOO* . . . *SULLIEDDD* . . . *FLESHHHHH*"—the equivalent of Streisand's excruciatingly slow "Silent Night"; some he takes at a machine-gun rat-a-tat, scuttling across the stage in his nightdress and pouring out like a rhythmless rap: "Tobeornottobethatisthequestion"—the equivalent, in Streisand Christmas-album terms, of her dash through "Jingle Bells." As with Streisand, the diction is impeccable; as

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with Streisand, you're aware of technical virtuosity rather than feeling. This isn't a man wrestling with dilemma but a rehearsed outburst—like *soi-disant* nutters in the street who come up to you babbling idiotically in the hope that you'll give 'em some money just to clear off.

Miss Streisand was at the Variety Arts for *Death Defying Acts*, three one-act comedies by a troika of New York royalty—Woody Allen, David Mamet, and Elaine May. If the title has any meaning, it's to do with finding humor in life's low points. But don't be fooled into expecting any artistic highwire unicycling: all three authors are content to roll around in the safety net. The very titles evoke greatest hits, past triumphs, home turf: "An Interview"—a two-handed, three-piece-suited linguistic duel from Mamet; "Hot Line"—a switchboard comedy from May; and "Central Park West"—a penthouse sex farce from Allen. Michael Blakemore has staged them in ascending order of joke density, which seems like a commercial calculation rather than an artistic one. Mamet's begins with nit-picking and verbal pedantry—over the fate of a borrowed lawnmower—and Paul Guilfoyle and Gerry Becker appear to have stepped straight out of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. But there's something unsettling about Becker's interrogator, and gradually you realize this isn't a job interview but a more crucial audition. In May's play, Linda Lavin calls in a pizza and calls up a suicide helpline and conveys wonderfully the despair that lies beneath savage, withering wit. And then it's on to Woody . . . "What's the difference between sushi and pussy? Rice."

Hmm. A Japanese joke. And a middle-aged man with a twenty-one-year-old mistress. And an apartment on Central Park. But it's futile to sift for autobiography. This is old-fashioned sex comedy, beautifully played by Lavin and Debra Monk, ruthlessly efficient, brilliantly but unobtrusively plotted, and, in its lack of either affection or careless cruelty, completely inhuman. A successful therapist and her best friend meet to discuss the former's husband and the latter's lover—and, from this stale scenario, Allen, almost as a joke-writing exercise, proves he can wring fresh laughs—even from a concluding device that was clapped-out thirty years ago. As divorce comedies go, this one restores the participants to the status-quo ante and puffs the evening into a light soufflé, immensely pleasurable but with little aftertaste. If the order had been reversed, *Death Defying Acts* would have been about something: Allen's inconsequentialities followed by May's wisecracking-through-the-crack-up, followed by Mamet and the last laugh of all.

But what do I know? The day after it opened, *Death Defying Acts* sold $128,000 worth of tickets, breaking the previous off-Broadway one-day record of $44,000. Why aren't these guys on Broadway? Because they subscribe to the same inverted snobbery as Fiennes and Keanu Reeves. For them, Hackney and Winnipeg and off-Broadway are spiritual retreats; Broadway is a strategic retreat—when there's nowhere else left. Helen Reddy in *Blood Brothers*, Jerry Lewis in *Damn Yankees*: that's what I call death-defying acts.

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The media

Getting our bearings on Barings

by James Bowman

The story they most wanted it to be was clearly compelling. Editors knew that something big and important and potentially interesting had happened when young Nicholas Leeson broke the bank at Barings, by speculating on futures based on the Nikkei stock average. They just didn't know how to sell it without getting bogged down in explanations of boring technicalities like "derivatives," which even "60 Minutes" couldn't make sense of. But the story they wanted out of it made up for all that. It was a story about class. A plasterer's son from Watford had single-handedly ruined the oldest and most blue-blooded financial institution in the English-speaking world.

Of course it turned out to be too good to be true. The story broke over the weekend of February 25–26, so the Sunday papers and newsmagazines had a whole week to write it up as a class story. The "barrow boy," the "oik" from the wrong side of the tracks with two A-levels (in the American press this was roughly translated as "high-school graduate," though it's probably more like a year or two of college), had taken it on the lam but then turned up in Frankfurt, while his aristocratic employers presumably had their toffee noses so far in the air that they couldn't even see what he had been doing. Everyone knows that aristocrats are lazy and out of touch and absurdly trusting. And everybody knows that the barrow boys and oiks are cheeky, irreverent risk-takers who are likely to go too far if given half a chance. It was obvious what had happened.

Just before final deadlines, however, disaster struck. At a press conference in Singapore on Saturday, evidence was presented that the Barings blue bloods had known about Leeson weeks ago and about the dangerous management practices in the Singapore office as much as three years ago. In retrospect, it seemed obvious that this young man could not, on his mere say-so, have induced the bank's officers to borrow three or four times the amount of the bank's total worth in order to meet his margin calls. Whatever had happened to ruin the bank had happened with the connivance of people in London—perhaps some of the very blue bloods who had already been written up, with rueful regret or with glee, as Leeson's hapless victims. The affair may have had to do with organized thievery or organized stupidity, but it did not (unless Leeson's unknown co-conspirators were fellow oiks out to ruin their aristocratic bosses even at the cost of ruining themselves) have anything to do with class.

What were the editors to do? In a great illustration of the old journalistic maxim that you don't let the facts interfere with a good story, the answer nearly everywhere was to go with the class story anyway. In Britain, at least, the quality papers provided an overlay of explanation that the real issues lay elsewhere (it helped that we didn't yet know where!). And, after all, the class angle could be sold on the grounds of what jour-

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nalists customarily call "irony." That is to say, Mr. Leeson's parentage, background, and education might be, strictly speaking, irrelevant to what he got up to in Singapore with money belonging to the Queen and other toffs, but it did seem "ironic," didn't it, that 233 years of banking history all bound up with European history could be snuffed out in a few weeks by the actions of a little nobody from Watford?

In America, perhaps, the temptations were greater. American editors know only two things about Britain—that it has a class system and it used to have an empire. Obviously they had to make maximum use of both and did not let news of the Singapore press conference interfere.

And who could blame them when even British editors wanted this to be a class story? On one side, the story was, as perhaps could only have been said by Taki, the London *Sunday Times*'s gossip columnist and admirer of Old Etonians like Peter Baring: "The first time they employed an oik, they went broke." Even Taki felt he had to include the disclaimer: "As one snob put it." For the most part, however, *The Sunday Times* took, as it generally does, an aggressively Thatcherite line, finding in the affair a stern moral about the corruption of the old élites and actually managing to make something of a capitalist hero out of young Leeson.

Like other papers, the *ST* led its excellent four-page investigation with the class theme on the flimsy pretext that for a while it had seemed more plausible as an explanation than it did by the time the story was written.

> By the time the City bars closed on Friday, the banking disaster was being dismissed as a matter of class. Leeson, the "first oik" hired by Barings bank—as one chortling broker put it—had brought down his masters because they were too blue-bloodedly silly to notice what he was up to.
>
> "He had a lot of balls but no bearings," giggled another broker.
>
> But did the boy from Watford act alone in the fall of the City's oldest merchant bank? As the laughter gives way to cold analysis, evidence is mounting that the "oik", who bankrupted Barings by building up debts of at least £700m in his dealings in the Far East, was far from a solitary wild card . . . "Some of the Barings management will find it very difficult to prove they were not utterly incompetent," predicted a senior director of a high street bank.

There were sidebars about, on the one hand, "the chill and charm of a dynasty born to banking," and, on the other, the high-risk, hard-driving, classless, and Thatcherite world of derivatives traders, where "plumbers meet PhDs." In the main story, the "adrenalin-charged" life of the classless Mr. Leeson is made to sound rather attractive, and the lad himself comes across as almost a noble figure, "a gambler who sees one last chance to recoup his losses" and risks all on a single throw of the dice. Foolhardy? Perhaps. But still the act of a brave man, and an act which, he says, "was approved, even encouraged, by his superiors at Barings." In fact, it was really Barings' stuffy reputation which was responsible for the debacle as much as Leeson, since many traders "were saying Barings was much too sensible to make a mistake like that."

And then there was the "supremely arrogant" senior management, which expected to be bailed out by the Bank of England or the Sultan of Brunei. The piece was rounded off with a little democratic chortle that Barings' assets had been bought by the Dutch ING financial group, since "some at Barings, aristocrats to the last, do not like the idea of being owned by a company that used to be Holland's privatised post office." It jolly well ought to serve them right!

The paper's editorial leader linked the Barings story with the Prime Minister's having said that he found the large salaries of some of Britain's top managers and CEO's "distasteful." In true Thatcherite fashion, the editorialist pointed out that

> there is, as this newspaper has always made clear, a huge difference between the captains of

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> industry who earn their salaries in a competitive market, and by creating and building up enterprises, and the bosses of newly privatised monopolies who enrich themselves with high-rise pay and perks.

Labour Party calls for increased regulation in the City completed what the editorial called "a bad week for capitalism" which could threaten "the freedoms the past 16 years have brought" and obscure what seems to the writer the luminous certainty that "there can be no turning back."

The Sunday Telegraph, by contrast, seemed to like the idea of turning back, though perhaps more than sixteen years. Its sympathies are not classless and egalitarian like those of *The Sunday Times*. In fact, it is rather well-disposed to the class system on the whole. Its coverage gently hinted at the question of class's relevance in Taki terms, implying the question: What did Barings expect to happen when it hired a bounder like this?

Nicholas Farrell's report began with the contrast between Peter Baring, who was made Chairman of the Board in 1989, and "Nick" Leeson, who put his foot on the bottom rung of the Barings ladder in the same year.

> The first appointment was very important. The second did not seem so. Who could have seen that fate was waiting to entwine their futures with such grotesque consequences.

Here again we have the "ironic" relevance of the class system, and the paper proceeds to make the most of it. Farrell goes on to detail Peter Baring's history and "qualifications" which seem to include having attended Eton ("where he was noted for his sporting prowess") and Magdalene College, Cambridge. (Universally known at Cambridge, by the way, as the college for aristocratic thickoes.) At the peak of Leeson's success, notes Farrell, "Suddenly the boy wonder from the wrong side of the tracks was earning as much as his boss." But

> already the bank had ignored clues that there could be trouble. When Leeson moved to Singapore in 1992 after marrying Lisa Sims he left behind debts: in February 1991 Watford County Court made a judgement of £639 against him on behalf of Hitachi and, although he paid that off, there was a second judgement for £2,426 owed to the National Westminster Bank in May 1992.

Such untrustworthiness in small things ought to have been a warning. Moreover,

> the different manner in which the two men spent their money could not be more revealing about the contrast between their class and between the old and the new way of doing banking.
>
> Peter Baring was old money, a keen deer stalker and skier. He either cycled or took the Tube each day to the bank's City headquarters from his tasteful home in Kensington. Leeson, on the other hand, drove from his flashy rented apartment in Singapore at the wheel of his expensive company sports car.

And the list goes on, pointing up the contrasts between the modest, moderate, scholarly Baring, details of whose charitable works are supplied, and the wild party boy, Leeson. Farrell generously acknowledges that

> at the start of last week, it appeared that the star trader had single-handedly destroyed the bank through recklessness and fraud to cover up his mistake—the equivalent of doubling up on red.
>
> As the week progressed it became clearer that Leeson had either been inadequately supervised or that managers at the bank must have known what he was doing. Either way, blame for the collapse could not lie with him alone.

Who did it lie with then? Surely not Peter Baring, who was certainly out of touch with the bank's daily operations (as most chairmen of boards are) and probably did not understand the whole derivatives business

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but whose only mistake, according to a "Barings insider," was assuming that everyone was as gentlemanly as himself:

> "He placed far too much trust in those below him. The rot does not lie with him but lower down management. He's dead straight—not the plotting sort."

And, of course, he is "devastated" about the whole business. "He is horrified by what has happened," says the insider. "Imagine being at the helm of something like this that your family has been behind for 233 years."

Sidebar pieces deal with the noble history of the house of Baring and with the perennial question of "What does it take to make a good derivatives trader?" Although it may seem that "if you can master the complications of the movement of a market like the FTSE or the Nikkei it doesn't matter where you come from or how socially repellent you are," in practice we find that the best traders are cultured, aristocratic types who "discuss Hackney Empire's *Hamlet* and the latest classical CDs."

> "The less aggressive and calmer people in the derivatives market tend to be the very best," explains Norrie Sinclair, senior consultant for the head-hunting firm Financial Management Selection. "They have learned the way the markets move and know that they can succeed in them."

Moreover,

> "The biggest problem is with people who can't take a loss," says Oliver Wells, of Michaelangelo Recruiting. "You need to have a self-imposed limit on your losses and when you have hit that be able to step away from them. Strength of character is very important."

Not surprisingly, the paper's leading article is lacking in *The Sunday Times*'s moralistic delight:

> The fall of a British bank, and particularly of an old and distinguished British bank, is a cultural event for this country. The fall of Barings is the financial equivalent of the closing of Trinity College, Cambridge, or St Bartholomew's hospital, or a Guards regiment. It is a blow against our way of life . . . Do the great old British banks any longer contribute anything special by their greatness, their age and their Britishness, or are they trading on a name that is not good for what we thought it was?

The implication is that they are, since there has been a sad decline in the integrity of bankers generally. But "the tale of Barings . . . is a tragedy. There was hubris—a lot of pride coming before a very big fall. There was nemesis. Now let us hope that there will be catharsis—the purging of the emotions through fear and pity."

Historical drama on such a scale did not, of course, survive the translation to the tabloids, which, in classic British tabloid fashion, combined salacious gossip about the sex life of hard-charging derivatives traders in general and Mr. Leeson in particular with savage moralizing. Michael Winner in *The News of the World*, for example, said that "the wild-boy 'trader' Nick Leeson and his toffee-nosed, pompous boss Peter Baring deserve each other . . . As far as I'm concerned the City of London with its grey-suited, old school-tie Jaguar-riding ponces has the greatest amount of morons per square inch anywhere in the world." The bank was behaving "like old time spivs!" says Winner, resurrecting a word for proto-Thatcherite sharks which originated in the postwar black market. The paper also announced a new contest called "Fantasy Derivatives," inviting people to lose big on derivatives trading. "No, we don't know what it means either—but you could still win £2,000."

In such a story it is natural that abstruse details be gathered up and organized according to some overarching mythic structure that will be recognizable to readers. They want to know what the moral of the story is first before they commit themselves to reading up on it. And a story like Leeson's

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is a good example of how this journalistic process works because it is one that everyone recognizes at once as *having* a moral. It is too interesting not to. But it is natural that different observers will find different morals in it, and the American press often combined the class and empire themes as an excuse to be self-righteous about the British (a theme which it has not tired of for two hundred years) with a more general moral theorizing.

In *Newsweek*, for example, there was no attempt to revise its story about the antique British class system and the Empire in the light of the press conference on Saturday in Singapore. The admirably proletarian writer, "Bill" Powell, plunged into his subject with the breathless assumption that, ever since Leeson left school, "he had been like a kid pressing his nose against a window, watching a party to which he wasn't invited." But then, inexplicably, he *was* invited. Invited not only to the party but to "the life of the modern-day colonialist"—a latter-day scion of the Raj living it up in old Singapore—"a place that evokes images of empire," we are told, "from the massive cricket ground in front of the city square to old colonial homes in Bukit Timah behind Orchard Road.

How could Leeson be simultaneously the colonialist master and the victim of class discrimination at home? Easy. He is "a product of what in Britain has come to be known as the Thatcher revolution. To him, as to former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, getting rich was glorious—and it mattered not a whit what your class background was." Such Thatcher-clones may not have fit in among the blue bloods at Barings any better than the Lady herself had fit in among the old bulls of the Tory Party. But in both cases, the genteel traditionalists had need of these less gentlemanly types to do their dirty work for them. "The [Baring] family had run the firm for 233 years, and Nick Leeson had about as much in common with Peter Baring as he did with the Queen Mum," writes Powell, showing that he is on tabloid-familiar terms with Her Majesty—

> but markets in the '90s are powerful things. They can, in their own way, level social hierarchies as quickly as they can lighten wallets. At Barings, pedigree no longer counts for much, because it's an affectation it cannot afford. American investment banks have for a decade now dominated their industry's increasingly profitable—and increasingly sophisticated—trading business. The fabled British houses have flagged. What mattered to Peter Baring is that Nick Leeson—for a while, anyway—did what counted. He made lots of money for the firm in a field that its senior management knew precious little about . . .

And here is the fatal flaw that brought down the venerable House of Baring: "[The blue bloods] were too aristocratic to be involved" in the sordid business of arbitrage in derivatives, Powell quotes "a former Barings employee" as telling him. In fact, they didn't even understand them. "If the traders in Singapore and Tokyo were young, it was because there wasn't anybody older in the firm who knew anything about the exploding derivatives business. The whole field seemed alien to them." Typical Brits! Stuffy and sniffy and unwilling to change, they were slow to follow Americans into the derivatives markets. "Tradition dies hard, and it clung stubbornly to its investment banking role" while wild youths like Leeson were taking risks because of their superiors' "dangerous lack of sophistication."

Even if *Newsweek* were unwilling to push back its deadlines in light of the news from Singapore on Saturday, they still might have profited by the more prudently understated approach of *Time* and *Business Week*, which also touched on the class issue but did not make it their whole story. *Time*'s Howard G. Chua-Eoan even remarks that "other traders were warning SIMEX authorities that Leeson was a 'gunslinger' who should be watched carefully. Singapore traders came to feel that Leeson considered himself invincible. As a currency trader put it, 'He began to believe his own press clippings.'" *U.S. News* ignored the story completely except for a question-and-answer in its "News You Can Use" sec-

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tion on the theme of how safe is your money. (The answer is, pretty safe.)

The newsmagazines could have rewritten their stories on Saturday. *The New York Times*, although it had run a story on Sunday noticing that top people at Barings knew what Leeson was up to, did not even manage to do so by Monday. On that day, John Darnton presented a portrait not unlike *Newsweek*'s of Barings as an emblem of the old aristocracy—though he tries to evoke pathos and nostalgia rather than the indignation of the self-righteous Mr. "Bill" Powell. He begins by telling of how Cecil Baring, the third Lord Revelstoke, "rode out the vicissitudes of international finance" in the 1920s and '30s by reading Homer or birdwatching in Spain. Alas, "today's scion, the 59-year-old chairman, Peter Baring, has little time for such leisure activities . . . Between 'The Iliad' and the computerized spreadsheet lies the quantum leap into modernity." Then, rather tangling himself in his metaphors, Darnton proceeds to tell why this "leap" was one that Barings "did not fully navigate."

> In recent years, it tried to move ahead from the old-fashioned clubby world in which it advised and handled the assets for a privileged circle of clients, beginning with the Queen. It entered halfway into the fast-paced and sometimes wildly profitable world of the trading room and global markets in securities, derivatives and other instruments. But it never completed the transition . . .

The result was a commercial version of C. P. Snow's "Two Cultures" wherein traditional bankers and go-ahead speculators "never cooperated and resisted efforts to live peacefully under one roof." In the words of one employee, says Darnton, what brought the bank down was this "clash of cultures." Or, as another "bank official" said: "They just couldn't live together and no one was strong enough to bring them together." Another said that the risk-averse characters of the old school were "the most conservative bankers I have ever met. If I think of a bunch of young, high-priced derivatives dealers running around, and next to that the Barings culture, I would say that's oil and water." I guess Darnton just didn't want to let all this reporting go to waste after it had been clear for two days that what had destroyed Barings was collusion between the two cultures.

Bad as *The New York Times* was, *The Los Angeles Times* was even worse. Fully five days after it had become known that Leeson had been abetted by those higher up at Barings, Marjorie Miller strained herself to the breaking point to lead as follows:

> There was a poetic symmetry in a move by Parliament to outlaw the English gentleman's sport of fox hunting last week just as authorities hunted down the fugitive who reputedly outfoxed the ultimate English gentleman's bank.
>
> These otherwise unrelated events provided a sterling reminder of how, despite the leveling effects of two world wars, the issue of class still thoroughly permeates British life, from country sports to the City—London's equivalent of Wall Street.

Yet there is method to her madness: Class could be relevant again if, as Leeson's eighteen-year-old sister, Sarah, is quoted as saying, the Establishment was "playing on his background, making him the scapegoat because of his upbringing." As if in corroboration, Miss Miller notices that *The Times* called Leeson "vulgar and arrogant" while *The Daily Telegraph* "sniffs" that Leeson's father, the plasterer, could be seen with his "stomach hanging out of his shirt." This seems to be enough for her to conclude that "in the press he is the church rat who made his way to the altar to scarf communion wafers." M.M. herself notices that "he had the bad taste to appear in the custody of German police wearing a baseball cap and carrying a Tom Clancy paperback."

Pretty thin stuff, you might think, to base a story on. But when all else fails, you can always find a taxi driver to give the needful quote:

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> "I don't like all this innuendo that, if you come from the working class, you're likely to steal," said Cornelius Kennedy, a taxi driver for the past 20 years. "We know he wasn't there because they liked him or because he's one of them. He made them a lot of money."

What is left to Miss Miller but to conclude with the speculation that Peter Baring may have connived at his own ruin? The news that the bank had ignored warnings about the potential for disaster in Singapore

> led many in the banking world and even, finally, in the press to ask whether Leeson was really a lone rogue from the wrong side of the tracks. Was there was [*sic*] a conspiracy of upper-class mismanagement that allowed him to gamble away so much money, or even attempt to help him win it back?
>
> In other words, was Peter Baring really dumb to all that was going on? Or is the old aristocrat dumb like a fox?

Well, maybe like a very, *very* dumb fox.

It was Monday's edition of *The Wall Street Journal*—no doubt less comfortable than the aristocratic *New York Times* when it comes to throwing around words like "culture"—which got down to brass tacks in the first sentence of its front-page article: "Who knew what, and when did they know it?" Leeson was not, to the *Journal*, a rogue trader who took advantage of poor communication within the company but the fall guy for some higher-ups who had got caught engaging in dubious activities. The model for them was not working-class Thatcherites blowing by the old aristocracy but Watergate burglars taking the rap for the real crooks higher up. "For Mr. Leeson's positions to have gone unnoticed by others in Barings' derivatives operations, present and former Barings officials say, would have been nearly impossible," write the article's co-authors Marcus W. Brauchli, Nicholas Bray, and Michal R. Sesit.

Why then did no one do anything about it? The best answer the *Journal* can come up with is that they didn't want to lose Leeson. "Without him," said an internal audit report quoted by Messrs. Brauchli *et al.*, the Singapore office "would lack a trader with the right combination of experience of trading sizable lots, a detailed appreciation of the trading strategies, familiarity with the local traders' limits and practices and contacts among traders and officials." This does not make sense. If the firm's executives were in a position to know of the risk Leeson had exposed them to, then they were also in a position to know that personnel decisions in regard to the staffing of the Singapore office would soon be irrelevant if he was allowed to carry on. The whole company would soon be out of business—as indeed it was.

But the need to speculate about reasons in the absence of knowledge is doubtless as powerful in the journalist as the twin imperatives to mythologize and moralize. In the end the best story may be a new version of the romance of 1980s trading. Or so we might conclude from Paul Blustein in *The Washington Post*, from whom we learn that Singapore is *the* place to be for young traders, the *beaux chevaliers* of international finance:

> It's a culture of people who love living on the edge and who regard words like "totally fearless" as the highest praise.
>
> It's a culture where the guys—almost all of them are men—who win with the biggest and gutsiest market positions stand tallest in the trading pits and the dealing rooms. Education and breeding count for little—the ones with the uncanniest ability to catch the markets' zigs and zags tend to be gritty types who, like Leeson, lack a college degree.

Another trader protests against the perception that he and his fellows are "a bunch of cowboys." On the contrary, "This is an honorable business" which is not just about money. "We do this because we get a buzz from it," he says. What could be more honorable than that? Certainly not journalism!

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Books

The real Ross

by Brooke Allen

The ungainly figure of Harold Ross has played a leading role in a number of memoirs. Notable among these are James Thurber's *The Years with Ross* (1957), an amusing account of *The New Yorker*'s early days, and Brendan Gill's *Here at "The New Yorker"* (1975); Gill, unlike Thurber, was unsentimental about Ross, indeed frequently acid, but he didn't underestimate the founding editor's contribution to the magazine's success. *Ross, "The New Yorker," and Me* (1968) was written by Ross's first wife, Jane Grant, who managed to make a dull book out of a fascinating subject. Ross also made an appearance in Wolcott Gibbs's 1950 play, *Season in the Sun*, whose stage directions insultingly suggested that the actor playing the Ross part should be able to play Caliban or Mr. Hyde "almost without the assistance of stage makeup."

But oddly enough there has been until now no actual biography of Ross, though the forty years since his death have only confirmed his position as the most influential magazine editor of this century. Thomas Kunkel, a newspaperman who has never before written a book, has rectified the situation with a sympathetic, entertaining, and informative study, *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of "The New Yorker."*[1] As his title suggests, Kunkel writes with a mission: to dig Ross, the real Ross, out from under the avalanche of anecdotes that have obscured his talents and made him out to be a charming but absurd "character," a Colorado rube who had no business setting himself up as an arbiter of fashion and taste.

While admitting that Ross was a highly-colored individual, Kunkel objects to the "cartoon" treatment accorded him by Thurber and Gill.

> This cartoon Ross was said to be aggressively ignorant, unfailingly rude, sexually naïve, and generally intolerant. His comic tendencies were exaggerated, his editing acumen trivialized, and his achievements laid to dumb luck and the skill of his bemused, solicitous associates. As with all caricatures, there were nuggets of truth underlying each of these assertions, but on the whole they were rubbish. Even so, this deleterious view of Ross took such firm hold that today, if he is remembered at all, it is as Ross the Wonder Editor, the literary equivalent of the precocious pony at the sideshow who taps out sums with his hoof.

Kunkel's defense of Ross has produced a wonderfully readable biography, but I'm not at all sure that Ross ever really needed defending in the first place. Thurber and Gill might have had some fun at Ross's expense, but they were always aware that he was, if not necessarily a "genius," then an editor of very great gifts. "He had a sound sense," Thurber wrote, "a unique, almost intuitive

1 *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of "The New Yorker,"* by Thomas Kunkel; Random House, 497 pages, $25.

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perception of what was wrong with something, incomplete or out of balance, understated or overemphasized," and almost all of the *New Yorker* writers "would rather have had the benefit of his criticism than that of any other editor on earth." Gill was admittedly more a Shawn man than a Ross one, but he never denied the fact that *The New Yorker* owed everything to Ross's wild energy and pertinacity. He credited Ross with understanding that the real success of his magazine was due to his own willingness to encourage "people more talented than he to do their work better than they had hitherto known how to do it, largely by being harder on themselves than they had been accustomed to be. Simple enough, but how rare!"

Kunkel attempts to come up with a plausible response to the question asked by Ben Hecht, and indeed by almost everyone who knew Ross: "How the hell could a man who looked like a resident of the Ozarks and talked like a saloon brawler set himself up as pilot of a sophisticated, elegant periodical?" There are two partial answers.

First: *The New Yorker*, at least in its earliest days, was not really all *that* sophisticated. Ross's imposition of the editorial "we" and a tone of amused but rather jaded condescension reflected not so much his own sophistication as his idea of what "sophisticated" ought to sound like, and it didn't fool everyone; more than one reader back in the Twenties felt that the magazine betrayed its staff's "too-recent escape from Middle-Westernness." True sophistication of the kind Ross sought only came to *The New Yorker* with the arrival, in 1927, of the young writer E. B. White, and with the addition of Katharine Angell (soon to be Mrs. White) to the editorial staff. At that time, though Ross had already come up with many of the magazine's final, successful, ingredients—"Comment," "Talk of the Town," the profile, the one-line cartoon—his real challenge lay in recognizing that White's voice, playful, bemused, and ironic, set exactly the editorial tone he had been looking for, and in effectively setting White to work his magic throughout the magazine. Later, in 1927, Wolcott Gibbs and Thurber also began work at *The New Yorker*, and the magazine of which Ross had long dreamed finally came into existence. In Gill's words, "Ross perceiving that, though the magazine was his, the persona of the magazine must be White-Thurber is what led to its success." This is patently true, though, as Kunkel wittily illustrates, the editor's distinctive persona made its mark on the magazine in the guise of the Thurber Man: King Clode, Walter Mitty, and any number of other beleaguered husbands owe a clear debt to Harold Ross.

Second: it hardly needs saying that Ross himself was not quite as unsophisticated as he liked to make out. Playing dumb was something of an editorial strategy: he never pretended to know something if he didn't, but he often pretended not to know something he really did, posing as the most ignorant reader possible in order to inspire his writers to greater intelligibility. Marc Connelly described this technique vividly:

> After *The New Yorker* was solidly established, Ross, pretending ignorance, would often listen with an imbecilically gaping mouth to something being said by a crony of which he had more knowledge than the speaker. At the conclusion of an incorrect statement he would yell with make-believe fury, "That shows you're a god-damned ignoramus!" and then proceed with lordly politeness to state the facts. However, if a comparative stranger pretentiously said something inaccurate, Ross would merely grunt an acceptant "Uh huh" and walk away.

Occasionally, of course, and despite his impressive store of general knowledge on all sorts of subjects, Ross's ignorance was only too genuine. Perhaps the most famous Rossism was his query, "Is Moby-Dick the man or the whale?" but my own favorite is when, not knowing he was dealing with a quotation, he edited "nature red in tooth and claw" to read, for some obscure and unexplained reason of his own, "nature red in claw and tooth."

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To pretend ignorance was part of Ross's obsessive quest for clarity in his magazine, a hard-fought campaign which must on occasion have driven his writers half mad. As A. J. Liebling put it, clarity "is a fine and necessary quality, but you can go just so far with it. You cannot make subtlety or complexity clear to an extraordinarily dull reader, but Ross in editing would make himself *advocatus asinorum*." Liebling estimated that of the scores of marginal questions Ross scrawled on every manuscript, perhaps 2¾ percent would actually improve the article. (This editorial technique did not die with Ross: the poet Donald Hall remembers the manuscript of a profile he was working on being sent back by William Shawn with 150 queries and notes on a single page.) In Liebling's own assessment, it was not Ross's pursuit of clarity that made him a great editor, it was his attention to the entire product, the fact that he took everything seriously, from fiction to fashion notes. For example, wrote Liebling, "he knew no more of horse racing than a hog of heaven, but he knew how to find and keep Audax Minor, G. F. T. Ryall, whose tone is precisely right for *The New Yorker*."

Perhaps the real secret of Ross's success lay in his willingness to be infinitely adjustable in accepting the evolution of his brainchild into something very different from what he had planned. The triumphant *New Yorker* of the Thirties and Forties, after all, was not exactly the publication that Ross had envisioned when he launched the magazine in 1925. Ross conceived the magazine first and foremost as a humor magazine. His own tastes and experiences pointed him in that direction. As a private in the First World War he had (with a group that included Alexander Woollcott and John Held, Jr.) edited the enlisted men's newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*; upon demobilization he launched *The Home Sector*, a weekly magazine for the ex-G.I.; after that he did a stint as co-editor of *Judge*, a "wheezy and out of step" humor magazine. He had for years been bothered by the moribund nature of what passed for humor in popular magazines, and he hoped to revolutionize the genre by producing a quality publication in which humor would be of paramount importance and whose "general tenor," according to Ross's prospectus, would be "one of gaiety, wit, and satire." Ross succeeded, probably beyond his own fondest dreams, in revolutionizing American humor: perhaps his greatest legacy (and that of the magazine's brilliant and original art director, Rea Irvin) is the invention and perfection of the modern cartoon, which under Irvin and Ross changed from the corny "he said/she said" illustrated gag to an economical one-line medium of real art and real wit, with image and word intrinsically linked.

But as the Jazz Age drew to an end, and New York and the world entered a more serious era, it became evident that humor was no longer *The New Yorker*'s principal *raison d'être*. During the Depression, it is true, the magazine's writers—with the notable exception of White—had failed to catch the right tone. "Let's let the other magazines be important," Ross would say, using "important" as a euphemism for "dull." The facetious man-about-town editorial manner jarred with the city's obvious poverty and despair, and the magazine was accused of "sitting out" the Depression. But as the Thirties progressed and the international situation grew increasingly grave, the magazine's writers responded with a new sense of seriousness and political engagement; even the fiction changed in tone as the carefree note struck by early contributors like Thurber, Robert Benchley, S. J. Perelman, Clarence Day, and Dorothy Parker gave way to more serious work by writers such as Cheever, Shaw, and O'Hara, work which we now think of, in fact, as "*New Yorker* fiction."

Ross, an isolationist and a conservative, accepted the fact that his best writers were quite otherwise, and following the urging of William Shawn, who had joined the magazine's staff in 1933, gave them a free rein to write what they thought important. The war years saw *The New Yorker* definitively take its place as a forum for serious political

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writing, thanks to the war coverage of Liebling, Janet Flanner, Molly Panter-Downes, Rebecca West, and others. This is not to say that Ross did not occasionally chafe at the high seriousness that had overtaken his "comic paper." His discomfiture was still apparent in 1946 when John Hersey's powerful essay "Hiroshima" weighed in at 31,000 words. Ross knew that the article was as important as anything he had yet published and would create a sensation; he knew that for maximum impact it should be published in full rather than serialized; but he could hardly bear to do the dirty and bump cartoons, Newsbreaks, "Talk of the Town," and the other regular features that week to make room for it. As Kunkel writes, "gutting the issue to run 'Hiroshima' amounted to the final capitulation, the ultimate admission from its editor that his onetime comic sheet was now so serious and, alas, so respectable that it could comfortably publish the most sober testament he had ever read." Ross made the admission and gutted the issue (in the process getting rid of Hersey's original, pretentious title, "Some Events at Hiroshima"). There can be no doubt that he did the right thing, though times have changed to such a degree that one now looks back with regret to a time when *The New Yorker* did not take itself quite so seriously, when the editor actually believed the dissemination of humor, rather than of editorial opinion, to be his real mission in life.

Thomas Kunkel tells Ross's story in engagingly fresh and slangy language, a style not unlike that of Ross's own letters and memos, and the result is that genuine sense of sympathy between writer and subject which is always to be desired, but not by any means always to be found. Kunkel crams his book with fascinating details, from the invariable lunch menu of the magazine's publisher, Raoul Fleischmann (two martinis straight up, a dozen oysters on the half-shell, and ice cream), to the explanation for Janet Flanner's mysterious pen name, Genêt (it was Ross's notion of how "Janet" might sound in French). Kunkel's easy acknowledgment of Ross's many shortcomings is appealing, and he achieves real delicacy in writing of Ross's tragi-comic domestic life: Ross shared many tastes and interests with his first wife, Jane Grant, a *New York Times* reporter who was instrumental in getting *The New Yorker* off the ground, but his subsequent two wives were good-looking lowbrows with whom he had little in common, and both marriages were short-lived. "Marriage was probably not his natural state," said Clifton Fadiman. "His natural state was talking with guys at a bar or at dinner. He was very male—*very* male." Ross was by nature antipathetic to feminism (claiming that his marriage to Jane Grant had failed because "I never had one damned meal at home at which the discussion wasn't of women's rights and the ruthlessness of men in trampling women"), and though he was clearly a sucker for a pretty face he had no sincere interest in women or in women's concerns.

Kunkel's book is important as the first serious biography of a major figure in twentieth-century letters, but not as an effort to convince the world that Harold Ross was a misunderstood genius. "Genius" is always a fraught, subjective term, and though Ross clearly had greatness of a kind, the word "genius" as applied to him is not only dubious but irrelevant. He was a phenomenon; he had tremendous influence on every aspect of magazine publishing and writing. But his memory has never really been in need of polishing, for in fact Ross long ago captured the popular imagination—not because of his absurdity but because of his attractions. Ross embodied the American Dream: rough-hewn, plain-speaking, masculine; a Western gee-whiz guy who despised fancy college men and society sophisticates, yet created a publication that was the last word in sophistication; an anti-intellectual in the real American tradition who was able to beat the intellectuals at their own game. As Thurber knew, Ross was as magnificent and uncompromising as a great character of fiction; he could have stepped straight from the pages of Mark Twain. His new biographer does him every justice.

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Master & critic

William Arrowsmith
Antonioni: The Poet of Images.
Edited, with an introduction
and notes, by Ted Perry.
Oxford University Press,
195 pages, $25

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

Some years ago, when an architect friend of mine asked Clement Greenberg why he hadn't written more about architecture, I was surprised to hear him say, "Too hard." Did he mean that there were too many factors to be taken into consideration: the building in itself as a work of art, its relation to both past traditions and present innovations, and, most vexing, the intricate tangle of personalities and realities, of artist's intentions, client's needs and desires, economic and structural constraints, and all the rest of it, necessary for the realization of any architectural project? Perhaps, too, Greenberg was thinking of how elusive architecture can be, of how dependent we are upon memory and temporal sequence in experiencing buildings (even more than we are in experiencing most sculpture) since it is clearly impossible to see all exterior views of even a modest building at the same time, just as it is impossible to perceive even the simplest of interiors and exteriors simultaneously.

If architecture is too hard, what about films, which depend even more on collaboration and hard-to-control variables in order to be realized, and even more on one-way, linear sequences of time in order to be perceived? Not to mention the fact that films *move*, so that the visual compositions so essential to their coherence (and quality) go rushing past the viewer, sometimes even more rapidly than the spoken words that co-exist with the images. Yes, I know there are any number of excellent film reviewers whose evaluations of movies, past and present, have far-reaching effects on a wide audience, helping us all to decide what to see on a free evening. What is rare is not informative movie journalism, but trenchant, enlightening *film criticism*, judicious writing that examines—say—the entire range of a single filmmaker's efforts and succeeds in giving us a sense of what is characteristic and individual about that body of work.

The late William Arrowsmith's posthumously published study of the work of Michelangelo Antonioni aims at doing just that. Left unfinished when Arrowsmith died in 1992, and now deciphered, edited, and introduced by Ted Perry, the former director of the film department of the Museum of Modern Art, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images* is a fascinating addition to the legacy of a critic with a formidable reputation as a translator of ancient Greek drama and modern Italian poetry and prose. Arrowsmith scrutinizes the celebrated and controversial Italian director's entire career in eight essays, each devoted to one of Antonioni's best-known films: *Il grido*, *L'avventura*, *La notte*, *Eclipse*, *Red Desert*, *Blow-up*, *Zabriskie Point*, and *The Passenger*. That Arrowsmith profoundly admired Antonioni's work is a fundamental assumption and not open to doubt. Perry quotes Arrowsmith as declaring that he believed

> that Antonioni is one of the greatest living artists, and that, as a director of film, his only living peer is Kurosawa; and that he is unmistakably the peer of the other great masters in all the arts. As an innovator and manipulator of images, he is the peer of Joyce in the novel; in creating a genuine cinematic poetry, he stands on a level with Valéry and Eliot in poetry proper; and that his artistic vision, while perhaps no greater than that of Fitzgerald or Eliot or Montale or Pavese, is at least as great and compelling.

(No, I don't want to explore why Fitzgerald is included in that list.) Arrowsmith's analysis of the films is rigorous, meticulous, and passionate. It is, however, anything but a straightforward investigation of Antonioni's evolution, because of the importance that he attaches to the director's recurring themes.

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Arrowsmith constantly interrupts his dissection of the unfolding narrative of a given film to remind us of related moments in other works. It's an approach that seems almost perversely contrary to how we usually experience movies, giving ourselves over to the hermetic world, the carefully designed progression of time, and the development of the story presented to us on the screen, seduced by film's seeming verisimilitude. (Even as perceptive a critic as Roger Fry, in his well-known "An Essay in Aesthetics," seems to have regarded the life-likeness of cinema as its outstanding characteristic, although, admittedly, film was still in its infancy when he wrote the essay, in 1909.) But, Arrowsmith notes, Antonioni's thematic repertory was "complex but also severely limited; the motifs are recurrent, even obsessive. That is why almost any Antonioni film reveals an extremely close affinity with any other." It is also why, Arrowsmith believes, all of them must be taken into consideration, more or less simultaneously, in evaluating the director's achievement. As he puts it, "The single individual film finds its meaning and even its power in a single developing *body* of work, in the oeuvre."

Arrowsmith identifies Antonioni's most characteristic continuing preoccupations as "the relationship between love and violence; between Eros and Thanatos; between internal and external space; between psyche and world; between change and the human capacity to adapt or not to adapt; between technology and nature; between reality and paradise." He tracks their persistence from 1956 to 1975, from *Il grido* to *The Passenger*, explaining that each film "amplifies" the significance of such motifs in any and all of the others. Arrowsmith illustrates these themes painstakingly, film by film, almost frame by frame, pointing not only to what is constant in how they are presented, but to what changes, throughout the body of Antonioni's work, as the director creates—or selects or finds—an enormous variety of visual and narrative metaphors for his obsessions.

Arrowsmith dismisses the popular press—for whom he is said to have had little use—as lazy or insensitive when they complain of "Antoniennui" when confronted by the director's unchanging themes, by the complexity of the means he employs to present them, and by the effort the viewer is required to make in order to extract their full meaning. Arrowsmith's defense of Antonioni is so indicative of his own critical method, so revealing of his own values, that it is worth quoting at length:

> The astonishing complexity of Antonioni's work—the compression of so much highly inflected detail into every frame that it is literally impossible to make words describe it—is in large measure dependent upon this coherence of his oeuvre and upon the director's adamant refusal to defer to the attendance habits of audiences. He simply refuses to accept the prevalent notion that a film, despite the incredible complexity of which it is theoretically capable, is, by virtue of its serial presentation, doomed to one or at most two viewings. Why, after all, should the director demand less of himself and his audiences than any painter or poet?

What's perhaps most impressive about Arrowsmith is his thoroughgoing understanding of filmmaking not simply as art—as opposed to entertainment—but as *visual* art, something that seems self-evident but is given surprisingly short shrift in much writing on film, which frequently emphasizes literary values at the expense of visual ones. Arrowsmith is alert to how Antonioni's visual imagery both advances his narrative and serves as metaphor or counterpoint to that narrative, and he is equally sensitive to what I am afraid have to be called, unfashionably, formal qualities. Discussing *La notte*, which he regards as a masterpiece, Arrowsmith supports his claim by pointing out:

> Everywhere one looks, the compositional sense, the feeling for *significant*—that is expressively meaningful—inflection in black and white is astonishingly present. From the con-

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> trasting clothes . . . of the characters, to the complex and dramatic alteration of feeling as the blacks deepen, or lighten, as black and white intersect in intricate design.

Arrowsmith itemizes a host of similar examples from the film, including Antonioni's subtle use of a range of grays to signal the passage of time, over the course of a day, through changing qualities of light, both indoors and out. In the same way, in the essay provoked by the later *Blow-up* (which, unlike *La notte* or *L'avventura*, was shot in color), Arrowsmith dwells on the important role Antonioni gives to hues, tones, and textures in establishing mood. He notes, too, that the film's unifying palette of colors is stated within the opening sequence, a declaration of limits that serves to make any deviation from these limits dramatic and significant, both visually and as narrative.

Arrowsmith's deep familiarity with Italian literature adds a good deal to his reading of Antonioni's films, not only because the parallels he draws broaden our sense of the context in which the director worked, but also because they alert those readers with no Italian to resonances that disappear even in good translations. He makes convincing and provocative comparisons, for example, between Antonioni's work and that of the poets Giacomo Leopardi and Eugenio Montale, and the novelist Cesare Pavese. A reasonably cultivated speaker of Italian would be familiar with these paradigmatic modernists—Leopardi the pioneer, Montale the contemporary, Pavese falling somewhere in between, with the added luster of persecution by the Fascist regime—and would pick up the allusions and echoes that Arrowsmith points out, just as a reasonably cultivated American would pick up quotations or near-quotations from Whitman or Eliot. Knowing just how Antonioni made use of these connections obviously affects how we judge his work. Arrowsmith's quotations from Leopardi and Montale seem apt throughout his essays, but he is especially persuasive about Pavese. He finds Pavese's sensibility, his lean, deceptively matter-of-fact prose, his fragmentary, elusive plots, and his troubled, alienated characters particularly close to Antonioni's. And like Antonioni's films, Arrowsmith notes, Pavese's novels "are much more impressive in their ensemble than individually, because it is the ensemble that gives meaning and power to the individual work."

So many of Arrowsmith's observations are so penetrating, so much of his analysis truly enhances our understanding of Antonioni, that it is startling to find that he is unwilling to make qualitative distinctions between individual films. Quite the contrary, this otherwise exacting critic appears to find everything that Antonioni has done of equal significance. That even Antonioni's lesser achievements or downright failures warrant serious consideration isn't at issue; the problem is Arrowsmith's determination to view inadequacies as pluses simply because they were *meant*. While he acknowledges, for example, that *Zabriskie Point* was less than enthusiastically received by the popular press, he then proceeds to refute their objections by explaining that Antonioni *intended* the very things to which they took such exception. At times, this brings him to the brink of self-parody. About *Zabriskie Point*, he says:

> This may be, at least in part, why the script is so monosyllabic and often banal; and why the faces of the two main actors are so disturbingly deadpan, lacking in that physiognomic richness and delicacy so apparent in the earlier films . . . It is at any rate worth asking whether Antonioni, a specialist in physiognomy, did not intend Mark's face to be as impassive as it is, so lacking in expressive subtlety, with such deadness of effect. . . . As for the script . . . it is often clumsy and wooden; but the very banality, I suggest, is at least partly intentional.

Happily, this sort of thing is the exception. For the most part, Arrowsmith's essays enlarge our perceptions of Antonioni's spare, but densely packed films. They also create cravings for an Antonioni festival, but that's

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another matter. In his introduction to *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, Ted Perry defines what he sees to be the function of the critic:

> The artist's role has its counterpart . . . in that of the critic, who comments upon and makes judgments about the work of the artist in the same way that the artist describes the world. The critic creates an artificial structure that makes more apparent what the artist is saying, while celebrating the imagination manifest in the work.

The best of William Arrowsmith's essays on Antonioni live up to these lofty expectations. That's the best recommendation I could give to any collection of critical writing.

Yesterday's tomorrow

Jules Verne
Paris au XXe siècle.
Edited, with a preface,
by Piero Gondolo della Riva.
Hachette (Paris), 216 pages, FF 119 paper

reviewed by Renee Winegarten

While Baudelaire lauded Edgar Allan Poe for "his concern with all the subjects that really matter"—listing among them probabilities, conjectural sciences, calculations about life in the future, the study of eccentrics and pariahs, clowning and drollery—the words could be applied just as aptly to Jules Verne (1828–1905). Indeed, the author of *Around the World in Eighty Days* derived something of his own substance from the tales of the tortured American writer, including the idea for the surprising twist of "the phantom day" in that suspenseful novel. In 1864 Verne himself was to publish an essay on Poe, whom he qualified elsewhere as "a weird and meditative genius." However, Verne would largely cultivate only one area of Poe's gift, the sphere of extraordinary travels, of reasoned mathematical deductions from current scientific advance, rather than venturing far into the realms of Gothic horror, the morbid, and the metaphysical. Both writers shared a black sense of humor, and a love of puzzles, hoaxes, cryptograms, and puns.

Verne's name may not be found in traditional histories of French literature; he does not figure in any canon. Still, over the years some of his stories have been filmed more than once; they also continue to be read and appreciated by novelists and critics of repute, and not just by the young who were once thought to form their sole public. Consequently, the appearance of *Paris au XXe siècle*, a hitherto unpublished short novel by Verne, could not fail to be an event. The keen interest aroused today by this once rejected novella suggests the sort of ironic reversal that would have amused the tricksy novelist himself. The brouhaha has been almost as great as that recently occasioned by the posthumous publication of *Le Premier Homme*, the novel by Albert Camus, a deeply moving study of poverty and alienation—themes that haunt Verne's story too.

It was not unusual for popular nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century authors to continue writing after their demise, the pen often being held by some close relative. *Paris au XXe siècle*, though, is fully authenticated by the letter of rejection written to the thirty-five-year-old author in late 1863 or early 1864 by his publisher, Jules Hetzel. The manuscript had apparently been submitted to Hetzel not long after Verne's first published work of fiction, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, had enjoyed a considerable success. It is not difficult to see why the manuscript failed to fulfill Hetzel's expectations for something lively and exciting to attract the young. Nor is it hard to appreciate why the novella is now such a source of fascination for modern readers.

In one respect, *Paris au XXe siècle* offers a savage, caustic satire on the state of culture and society under the Second Empire, with its callousness and money-grubbing utilitarianism—a portrayal not entirely without parallels today in certain quarters. At the same time the tale carries within it the dis-

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illusion and pessimism current in France after the failure of the Revolution of 1848. It gives voice to fears about the falling birthrate that would persist into the present century. It claims that machines have destroyed the virtue of individual bravery in war—one of the moans to be heard in France during and after the conflict of 1914–18. Bitter misogyny, widespread after 1848—and reinforced in Verne's own case by disappointment in love as well as in his marriage—counters the idealization of womanhood in the person of the demure young heroine. Nor are we spared delusions about "the degradation of the race," popularized by nineteenth-century French pseudo-science.

The novella also appears deeply personal, reflecting the author's early bohemian struggles in Paris and his close friendship with Aristide Hignard, the musician and future teacher of Chabrier, and Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, better known as Nadar, the great photographer and balloonist. Here are echoes of the young Verne's attempts to succeed as a poet and dramatist (partly under the patronage of Alexandre Dumas *père*), his exaltation of the romantic imagination after Victor Hugo (for whom he professed a veritable cult), and his commitment to a poetic credo of art that would have gratified Baudelaire himself.

Above all, Verne's novella delivers an astounding prophecy of what Paris and modern life would be like one hundred years later—in the early 1960s. This aspect was presumably of little concern to a reader of 1863 like Hetzel, who thought—perhaps rightly—that nobody would believe in this prophecy or be interested in it. But Verne's vision of the future, now our recent past, cannot but amaze the modern reader, in view of all the things that he managed to get nearly or absolutely right.

The central figure of the novella is an impoverished young orphan and poet, Michel Dufrénoy, whose true artistic inclinations are frustrated at every turn. By Verne's 1960, literature is no longer held in any esteem whatsoever: not just downgraded and ignored, it has been sacrificed to the applied arts and sciences, to industry and commerce. (We should have to add politics.) The mainstays of our civilization, Greek and Latin, are not just dead, they are "buried." As for the French language, it is in decline, full of borrowings from English—a complaint still to be heard. Everyone has been taught to read, but nobody reads anymore. We might be in the company of a contemporary critic of modern culture, or the lack of it.

In a society whose supreme value is money, and where the Stock Exchange (Verne had served briefly as a stockbroker) is "the cathedral of the day," only facts and what is "useful" are the concerns of the hour. A few rare marginal spirits, barely surviving elderly humanists and struggling young artists, sympathize with Michel and understand that he is talking about the imagination. Michel's philistine uncle, a wealthy banker and entrepreneur, has reluctantly taken the orphan poet, whom he regards as little better than an idiot, into his mechanized enterprise. But however hard Michel tries, he cannot adapt to the soulless system, and he is finally shown the door.

From then on, the only path is down. Nobody will publish Michel's poems. He finds work in the state-run Great Dramatic Warehouse, whose sole function is to provide entertainment. There, the employees collaborate to produce absurdly vacuous rewrites of successful plays and other nonsense (rather in the collaborative style of some of today's film or television scriptwriters). Michel cannot work like this and so, alienated and thoroughly déclassé, he quietly starves along with the rest of the poor and dispossessed.

When Verne's terrible winter of 1961–62 strikes, the much vaunted resources of science are seen to be powerless. Eloquently, Verne declares that science has suppressed distances, overcome time and space, placed the most secret forces of nature within reach of all, but it cannot vanquish the cold, that is, nature herself. Poor Michel traverses the snow-bound city on foot in a wild frenzy—he cannot even drown himself because the

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Seine is frozen. He ends in a despairing rage in the cemetery of Père-Lachaise, calling down fire upon "this accursed Paris." Notwithstanding the moments of black sardonic humor, this is not exactly an exhilarating picture.

There is a huge bureaucracy in Verne's city of the future. People are restless, scurrying about to make money, consumed by the "American spirit," deemed to be practical and materialistic. French women have lost their famous charm: they have become "American" and masculine. Marriage is almost destroyed, and words like "home" and "lifelong companion" have disappeared. Illegitimate children outnumber the legitimate. As for the structure of the city itself, in the center of it public buildings have displaced private dwellings. The city has spread into the environs, where the fresh country air has become polluted by smoke from factory chimneys. People have to travel great distances to find some pure air.

Evidently, in many ways, Verne was giving a jaundiced view of his own time. The great venturesome banks—like the Crédit Foncier—on which the enterprise of Michel's uncle is modeled, were founded in the 1850s, fostering the economic expansion of the Second Empire. Baron Haussmann was busy tearing down the old familiar jumble of buildings and reconstructing the capital, creating the new tree-lined boulevards. Just as in the novella, the lower orders who continued to work in Paris were forced out into the cheaper suburbs, where new factories belched smoke.

In Verne's vision of the future, a network of railways traverses the city itself, although the Métro actually did not begin to function until 1891. The trains run overhead, leaving the boulevards to pedestrians and to silent cars or "gaz-cabs" which have no visible motor. Writing before the proliferation of electric lamps toward the end of the nineteenth century, Verne sees the luxurious Parisian shops of the future brilliantly lit by electric light. Electric street lights go on all at once. There are even advertisements lit by electricity. (As a source of energy, electricity was often to be imaginatively harnessed in Verne's later writings.) Businesses make use of powerful copiers, of calculating machines like huge pianos. They also communicate throughout the world by electric telegraph and "photographic telegraphy," that is, "the facsimile of every kind of writing, autograph, or drawing." Vast quantities of paper are consumed.

How did Verne come to imagine this capital of the future with such startling acumen? One is reminded of the moment in his much-filmed adventure story *Michel Strogoff* when the cruel Tartar chieftain orders the blinding of the exemplary courier of the Tsar with the shattering words: "Look your fill! Look!" Verne "looked" intently. As a young man he was friendly with innovative spirits, not only Nadar, pioneer of aerial photography, but also the explorer Jacques Arago and his brother François, the celebrated physicist and astronomer. Verne consulted experts and savants. He spent hours reading about explorations, scientific discoveries, new machines. "In the depths of my province [he was then residing at Amiens] I work without cease and I read everything that is published," he was to say toward the end of his life.

By a leap of the imagination Verne could deduce possible or probable future developments from the trends of his day and from the numerous discoveries that were being made. The gas engine, for instance, at the origin of Verne's "gaz-cabs" and of present-day cars, had recently been invented. The third Lord Stanhope had produced a calculating machine as long ago as 1777, to be followed by others in the early nineteenth century. The "Pantélégraphe Caselli," ancestor of the FAX machine, existed from 1859. Verne would often speak, as it were apologetically, about seemingly unlikely episodes in his novels, episodes that (he declared) "progress" would ultimately confirm. He came to perceive that certain steps would eventually be taken: the South Pole would be reached, and so would the moon. Perhaps the most surprising example of this foresight

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occurs in *From the Earth to the Moon* and its sequel: the moonshot is fired not far from Cape Canaveral; and the expedition returns at a spot in the Pacific close to that where modern astronauts were actually recovered!

While Verne was evidently enthralled by scientific discoveries and their possibilities, it is clear from the early *Paris au XXe siècle* that he also disliked and feared them, and the modern world they heralded. This ambiguity would persist. As he showed in the novella, the advances of science could not overcome natural disasters. Frequently, in his later work, Verne waxes eloquent on the destructive forces unleashed by man's urge to press forward regardless of the consequences for humanity. He had been deeply perturbed by the developments in ballistics during the American Civil War and, in consequence, the unprecedented number of casualties and the greater havoc wreaked in that terrible conflict.

It is adventurous wounded American veterans of that war who, in *From the Earth to the Moon*, promote the Gun Club's experiments to reach the moon, experiments that cause untold upheavals throughout the world. "The whole natural order had been disturbed," claims Verne's narrator, who remarks on those who had placed themselves outside humanity by crossing "the limits imposed upon earthly creatures by God." This sentiment is echoed by the Canadian harpooner, Ned Land, in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, who observes that the strangely equivocal superman, Captain Nemo, vengeful misanthropist and (in secret, politically correct) caring humanitarian and lover of justice, may flout human laws but cannot resist natural laws. "I think we are seeing here things that God wished to forbid to the gaze of men!" exclaims the honest fellow. It is a view that Verne repeated elsewhere in his fiction.

At the same time, Captain Nemo's prisoner, Professor Pierre Aronnax, cannot resist his own scientific curiosity: "I would like to have seen what no man has yet seen, even if this insatiable need to learn should cost me my life!" Verne was aware of the ecological damage being caused, for example, by the destruction of invaluable creatures, but "this scourge is nothing to what will happen to our descendants when the seas have been emptied of whales and seals." It is as if in the later works Verne were possessed, on one hand, by a fascination with the inevitable advance of knowledge and, on the other, by a dread about where that knowledge may take us. In *Paris au XXe siècle*, however, for all the book's playful imaginative inventiveness, he expressed a profound hostility to the modern world.

The supreme interest of the novella lies in following Verne in his tentative beginnings as a writer of fiction, in observing what he was to discard or retain. Already, he had astonishing glimpses of a world to come that is in many ways familiar to ourselves, together with an awareness of cultural loss and of problems caused by technological progress that have not been resolved.

Absolute James

Alfred Habegger The Father:
A Life of Henry James, Sr.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 578 pages, $30

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Henry James, Sr. (1811–1882), is nowadays principally remembered for having sired two—or perhaps three—literary geniuses: William James, the psychologist and philosopher; Henry James, Jr., the novelist (who, after the family custom, will hereafter be called Harry); and, arguably, Alice, the remarkable daughter whose mental illness and lifelong invalidism—recounted in a compelling, posthumously published diary—are sometimes wildly attributed to "the Victorian patriarchical oppression of women." Each of these children has been the subject of his own biography; and, indeed, the story of the two other sons of Henry (the nongeniuses Bob and Wilkie James) has also been told in Jane Maher's *Biography of Broken Fortunes*. But for Miss Maher the father,

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Henry Sr., does not count: she subtitles her book *Wilkie and Bob, Brothers of William, Henry, and Alice James.* We have even had a number of group lives, like C. Hartley Grattan's *The Three Jameses* (Henry Sr., William, and Harry), F. O. Matthiessen's *The James Family*, Katherine Weissbourd's *Growing Up in the James Family*, and R. W. B. Lewis's *The Jameses: A Family Narrative.*

But, since it has been sixty years since Austin Warren's *The Elder Henry James* and much new information about the Jameses has emerged, Alfred Habegger's new biography, *The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr.*, is timely indeed. Mr. Habegger brings to his study a considerable fund of information about nineteenth-century American literature. A professor of English at the University of Kansas, he is the author of *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* and *Henry James and the "Woman Business."* This is his first venture into biography, and he attains an indifferent success. For although worthwhile, the book is not without serious deficiencies.

While Henry Sr. was a well-known author, lecturer, and public person in his own time—not to speak of an authentic genius and a remarkable personality—Habegger has here defined him as "the father," the sire of the literary offspring who eventually outpaced him in importance. This reductive point of view arises largely from Habegger's superior and amused treatment of Henry Sr.'s ideas, which the biographer treats with ongoing derision. The elder James would not have minded being called "the father." The term, after all, establishes a relation and implies the family. He did not hold with Whitmanian egotism, the celebration of the self, and the decline of altruism and Christian self-sacrifice in his time. And, as James in *The Nature of Evil* (1855) makes plain, the greatest of all evils is "the principle of selfhood, the principle of independence in man." It is this that deludes him into thinking that he is an autonomous agent rather than an instrument in the unfolding of God's purpose. "The sentiment of independent selfhood; the conviction of being the source of one's own good and evil: such is the sole ground of every evil known to the spiritual universe."

Henry Sr. had the good fortune to be born to a brilliant businessman, William James of Albany. This Irish immigrant founded the clan and made an immense fortune equalled in his time only by John Jacob Astor. Henry's inheritance made it possible for him to live a life of religious and intellectual self-development, free of the usual concern about subsistence. In later years, when Harry wanted to report to the neighborhood kids what his father did for a living, the elder James replied: "Say I'm a philosopher, say I'm a seeker for truth, say I'm a lover of my kind, say I'm an author of books if you like; or, best of all, just say I'm a Student."

In many respects, however, the Student's life was a difficult one. In 1824, at the age of thirteen, while playing a game called "fireball," Henry was badly burned. He was bedridden for quite some time, and (the wounds not healing) his leg was finally amputated in 1828. Crippled for life, he got about by means of a wooden leg, but mobility was always a problem. The pain of the long illness, followed by the amputation of his leg, seems to have addicted him to alcohol and sucked the youth down into a life of dissipation.

Certain it is that Henry was a dropout at Union College, a drifter for some time, and a disappointment to his father, a stern old Calvinist whose inflexible Presbyterianism led him to deal harshly with the dissolute son. In slighting his son in his will, William perhaps underestimated Henry—or perhaps he calculatedly shocked him into growing up. For, in a remarkable act of sheer will power, young Henry kicked his alcohol habit, and, after a remarkable religious conversion, pulled his life together, entered the Princeton Seminary in 1835, and began to prepare himself for the ministry. Strong-willed and independent as a thinker, he eventually broke with the Presbyterian orthodoxy of his teachers, left the seminary for Europe, and began a lifelong pilgrimage in

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search of a unified theory of scientific, theological, philosophical, and political truth. It is this James—the seeker, the spiritual pilgrim—who is most tiresome to his new biographer.

Important way stations on Henry's pilgrimage included his discovery of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Charles Fourier. Becoming one of the most radical free-thinkers of the nineteenth century, Henry James published his reflections in a series of books, articles, tracts, pamphlets, and letters to editors, among which the most important are *Christianity the Logic of Creation* (1857), *Substance and Shadow; or, Morality and Religion in Their Relation to Life* (1863), *The Secret of Swedenborg* (1869), and *Society the Redeemed Form of Man* (1879).

In the process of writing his books and articles, Henry of course took a wife (Catherine Walsh, in 1840) and fathered those remarkable children: William (1842), Harry (1843), Garth Wilkinson (1845), Robertson (1846), and Alice (1848). Rich and independent, Henry Sr. limped along at the head of a peripatetic household, and, with disorienting frequency, shifted about his family from place to place. They lived at various times in Albany, New York City, Europe, Newport, and, toward the end, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Wherever they went, Father drew to the household some of the most interesting persons of the time.

Controversy often attended their peregrinations. Henry was a polemical writer given to abstract reflection on eternal issues as well as the hot topics of the day. So devoted was he to the theological doctrine of justification by faith alone and to liberated spiritual self-development that he became flamboyantly anticlerical and offended nearly all the orthodox churchmen of the time. (Habegger remarks that James's "long and aggressive campaign against established religion" was "the only calling he would ever have.") Then, discovering Swedenborg, the Swedish mystic and author of *Arcana Coelestia*, he rethought the doctrine of justification by faith, rejected it as a "hideous dogma" that undercuts Christian charity, and, in *A Letter to a Swedenborgian* (1847), attacked the editors of and contributors to the Swedenborgian *New Jerusalem Magazine* and offered himself as the true expositor of Swedenborg's heavenly thought. So stridently argued were his polemical essays and books that he acquired the nickname "Absolute James."

The most notorious episode of James's free-wheeling abstract speculation, blind to the political realities of the moment, occurred in the late 1840s. Despite his great wealth, this enthusiast had become a devotee of socialism in the form of Charles Fourier's "voluntary association" in phalanxes of about sixteen hundred people each. Voluntary association also involved the question of marriage, then under intense discussion in feminist circles, and James reminded his readers that Swedenborg himself, in *Conjugal Love*, had authorized, in certain circumstances, a man's taking a concubine or mistress. (This revelation horrified even the Swedenborgians, who were trying to keep secret the Master's daring sexual views.) But James went even further.

To promote voluntary association in Fourierist phalanxes, James translated Victor Hennequin's pamphlet *Les Amours au phalanstère*, which brought out into the open what radicals complained of as "the secret evils marriage promoted—adultery, abortion, infanticide, even 'the conjugal use of arsenic.'" Recognizing that there would be both "Bacchantes and Bayadères" in any commune, Fourier had endorsed free love or any kind of heterosexual coupling that would promote "harmonic relations" in the phalanx. And in a series of articles in the Brook Farm weekly *Harbinger* and elsewhere, James sailed off into the utopian All by proclaiming the ecstasy of a perfect future in which spontaneous, voluntary love would replace the imperfect, transient, marital institution of the age. In doing so, James wondered aloud whether "God has *absolutely* restricted the gratification of the sexual passion to the conjugal relation." Blasting James

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as just another immoral free-love advocate, conservative Christian spokesmen like Samuel Irenaeus Prime countered that "*Fourierism* is only another name for *promiscuity*, and the doctrines of Association the most corrupt and corrupting that were ever promulgated under the guise of virtue and reform."

It was certainly senseless for James to have celebrated free love at a time when radical sex communes were popping up in America, groups like the Oneida Perfectionists, who had outraged public opinion by abolishing monogamy and instituting official promiscuity. James had been imagining a sexual freedom to be inaugurated only in some future time of utopian bodily and spiritual purity. He was appalled at the construction put upon his words and the public outcry at his theory of sex and marriage. He claimed that he had been misunderstood, and backtracked rapidly, thus infuriating the free-love radicals who thought they had bagged an influential millionaire. Always faithful in his own conjugal relations, James thereafter publicly supported marriage as a divine institution.

Even so, this episode makes Habegger root in the midden looking for evidence of adultery. James was a man of normal uninhibited sexuality who liked to flirt and laughed uproariously at witty *double entendres*. Despite the rooting, Habegger manages to turn up only one illicit kiss. The episode involved a private meeting in James's home between himself and a family friend, Mrs. Caroline Dall. As she put it in her diary, when it came time for her to leave James, they clasped hands and then James "drew my head down with a gaze—as compulsory as a blow—and kissed me on the mouth." This "electric shock" was "prolonged, steadfast—and compelling," such that while it was going on she conducted a "keen intellectual inquisition into its purpose." When it was over, however, she simply laughed and departed. Whatever she thought of its purpose, Habegger is pretty sure that the fifty-five-year-old seeker had something more carnal on his mind. Habegger seems aware that James remained seated because he could not, with one leg, conveniently rise to say goodbye. But he misses entirely the fact that Mrs. Dall initiated the kiss, that James was pinned down, and that the Svengali-James is claimed to have drawn down her head "with a gaze." What ocular power! What mesmeric talent! If this is the famous "male gaze" feminists now love to complain of, many a man will want a pair of James the elder's spectacles.

While there is much to commend in Habegger's life of James—the fullness of its research, the filled lacunae in the life, a certain vivacity of style—the book has serious defects. I am not convinced that Habegger understands James's sense of humor. At times he takes James's theoretical formulations as autobiographical confessions. He is a careless reader given to superficial psychoanalytical interpretations. In addition, the tone of the book is disastrous. It does nothing for our understanding of James to libel him on every other page as a "well-heeled drifter," "a blocked and monomaniacal hierophant," a man "parochial, obsessed, hermetic, invariably seeking to confirm and disseminate his special doctrines," "one more half-crazed American system builder," a Proteus driven by "his latest pipedream," "a sinister exterminating angel" impelled by "the suicidal intensity" of his religious life, a "crazed intellectual in pursuit of the ultimate and rational explanation of things."

Habegger has no patience with religious speculation and he seems without sympathy for other nineteenth-century concerns. What for our great-great-grandfathers were issues of great moment or even eternal life are for him the stuff of ridicule and supercilious condescension. The children thought more highly of the elder James. "Father is a genius certainly—a religious genius," William conceded when he came to edit his father's papers; "Father's cry was the single one that religion is real." And, in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William showed the forms that this reality could take. Harry likewise said of his father that "no more admirable case of apostolic energy combined with

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philosophic patience, of constancy of conviction and solitary singleness of production unperturbed, can I well conceive." For Habegger "it wasn't thinkable [to his sons] that this tremendously authoritative parent could be living in a fool's paradise." But a great many others had a high opinion of Habegger's fool. James came to have something of a popular following for his lectures and essays. Emerson told Margaret Fuller that James was a "very intelligent person," an "independent right-minded man." For Emerson he was "wise, gentle, polished," "with heroic manners, and a serenity like the sun." E. L. Godkin loved his ornate prose style. Thoreau found James's conversation solid and instructive. Count Adam Gurowski called James "the brilliant rhetorician." And, for James Russell Lowell, James was "the best talker in America." In his company, in fact, children could become geniuses in their own right.

The wager of the West

Ernest Gellner
Conditions of Liberty:
Civil Society and Its Rivals.
Allen Lane/The Penguin Press,
225 pages, $27.95

reviewed by David Gress

The British anthropologist and sociologist Ernest Gellner has been called "a nomadic predator in a world of settled intellectual allegiances." This is an apt description, both of the man and of his characteristic style. Born in Prague in 1925, Gellner is a leading member of that older generation of Central European Jewish refugees that is now well represented in the top ranks of British and American academia. For over thirty years, Gellner's unmistakable voice has been variously instructing, edifying, and irritating readers by explaining such subjects as the nature and object of knowledge, rural Islamic society, the origins and social function of nationalism, the limits of skepticism, the pretensions of psychoanalysis, and, more recently, the fundamental shifts and breakthroughs in world history and human social evolution. From 1949 to 1984, he taught at the London School of Economics, where his students included most of the current practitioners of the difficult discipline of comparative historical macro-sociology. In 1984 he moved to Cambridge as professor of social anthropology and, on retirement in 1992, he returned to Prague to start a new career as founding professor at the Central European University and head of its Center for the Study of Nationalism.

Whatever Gellner's subject, his work exhibits that nomadic and predatory style. He crosses disciplinary and chronological boundaries to snatch insights from David Hume, the fourteenth-century Islamic social thinker Ibn Khaldun, Ludwig Wittgenstein, critical Estonian Marxists of the 1970s, or —more rarely—twentieth-century Western academics. In fact, academics are often the object of Gellner's particular brand of scholarly sarcasm. One priceless example is his skewering of the trendy American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's defense of relativism. Gellner writes that relativism, particularly in the version that is now *de rigueur* in this country, leads "to sloppy research, appalling prose, much pretentious obscurity." Anti-relativism, or, as Gellner now calls it, "Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism," has been a frequent theme of his books since *Legitimation of Belief* (1974).

The amazing thing about Gellner's writings is not that they are wildly eclectic and apparently haphazard, but that, read carefully, they individually and collectively amount to a comprehensive explanation of the modern world in its various cultural and ideological versions—Western, Islamic, and Marxist; secular, fundamentalist, and postmodern. To understand the purposes and message of his new book, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, let me first state some presuppositions of what I take to be Gellner's general view.

Modern Western civilization rests on the

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wager that ordinary men are capable of disinterested reason. Their autonomy and freedom from coercion require that they refrain from coercing others in the name of morality or belief. Their prosperity rests on inventive use of specific, instrumental links to others who are their equals, not on bribery, extortion, or being the client of a boss or chieftain who rewards subservience with scraps of loot. Both their freedom and their prosperity depend upon virtues of reliability, reciprocity, and performance; virtues reinforced neither by ritual nor by revelation, but by the interest each member of society has in the disinterested performance of obligations by himself and others.

The type of society that arises where such rational, diligent, autonomous, endlessly innovative, honest, and dependable folk are the norm rather than the exception is that of Western democratic capitalism. Of all its unusual features, each of which contradicts what one would expect from human nature and the known repertoire of social organization throughout history, perhaps the oddest is that power in this society, whether political, economic, or ideological, is fragmented. This fragmentation of social power is a precondition of liberty and autonomy. Not because diffusion of power in itself yields freedom; in most of human history, it has yielded anarchy, followed in short order by despotism. Rather because, for a variety of implausible reasons, diffusion of power in the West caused or allowed people, not to band together in sects or conspiracies, but to form, autonomously, sets of associations and institutions that are "strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, nonetheless, entered and left freely, rather than imposed by birth or sustained by awesome ritual."

These associations, and the desire and tendency to form them, are the essence of "civil society." Its elements include churches, political parties, universities, sports, newspapers, libraries, museums, opera houses, professional organizations, and interest groups. In the West, even such fundamental institutions as the family and the workplace bear the imprint of civil society.

More than the sum of its elements, civil society is a form of social life with three basic characteristics: it is accessible to all, independent of government, and pluralistic. In its origins, Western civil society was defined in part by the liberation of economic activity from political control. Thus, one definition of a civil society is a place where "production becomes a better path to wealth than domination," so that "the best way to make money is to make money"; this in comparison to a place where the best way to make money is to capture political power and exploit the populace. Another definition of a civil society "is one which does not rechristen all its railway stations and boulevards and issue a new city plan each time the government changes." The first definition contrasts civil society to traditional society, the second contrasts it to totalitarianism.

The great virtue of *Conditions of Liberty* is that it explains what makes civil society possible, why it is important, and why it is such an unusual feature in human history. The book's only failing—if it is a failing—is that its author seems at times to be describing what one of his masters, Max Weber, called an ideal type. Gellner's civil society is not only the crucible of modern Western responsible individualism; it also appears, in his account, to be unproblematically alive, well, and full of promise. Given his starting point, which I shall come to in a moment, this implicit optimism is understandable if not justified. But healthy civil society, according to Gellner and to the eighteenth-century writers who first identified the phenomenon, requires responsibility, autonomy, and disinterested competence in its members.

Not only that: civil society requires that its members actively desire and cultivate such habits. If that is true, we must admit that all is not well with civil society in much of the West, certainly not in America, where many parents, schools, universities, media, and cultural figures teach incompetence, passivity, and short-term gratification. And to mention this set of challenges to civil

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society is to ignore the very different but equally grave challenges posed by the imperialism of the workplace, the mania of American corporations for burdening ever fewer employees with ever more work. This mania exhausts the workers, leaving them little energy for anything outside of work or the most immediate personal needs. The cultural dumbing-down of America threatens civil society with death by triviality; the productivity squeeze on workers threatens it with death by inanition.

Gellner does not see these threats, or, if he does, he considers them unimportant. One reason for this, I think, is that Gellner finds civil society so obviously attractive that he cannot accept that certain social and economic forces within the West might tend, deliberately or not, to undermine it. In one place he says that "one of the main glories" of civil society is its separation of social roles, so that, for example, not everyone need be a warrior to enjoy the blessings of peace. Thus, "Civil Society bestows liberty even on the non-vigilant," and, using erotic imagery inconceivable in an American social scientist, he continues:

> Only the brave deserve the fair, says the poet. But may we not aspire to a social order in which even those of us who are timid can enjoy feminine beauty? Such has always been my pious hope. Civil Society is an order in which liberty, not to mention female pulchritude, is available even to the timorous, non-vigilant and absent-minded.

Another reason that Gellner focuses on the benefits and the glories of civil society rather than on the dangers facing it within the West is his point of departure, which is the rediscovery of the term and the ideal of "civil society" in the thought and writings of Czech and and Polish dissidents of the 1970s and 1980s such as Leszek Kolakowski, Milan Kundera, Adam Michnik, and Václav Havel.

Both the original evolution of civil society in Europe and its re-emergence from under Marxist domination are examples of what I propose to call Gellner's Law of Social

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Evolution: the fundamental social breakthroughs from prehistory to the present were all, given what we know of human nature and human society, counter-intuitive and implausible. Once each breakthrough had taken place, however, the resulting advantages were such that it was quickly copied more or less widely, with the result that each seemed, in retrospect, inevitable. The list of these breakthroughs is not long: it includes agriculture, the state, the alphabet, science, nationalism, industrialization, and civil society.

As for the latter's revival, it "is of course intimately connected with the *Krach* of the Marxist system," and "this collapse . . . has taught us how better to understand the logic of our situation, the nature of our previously half-felt, half-understood values." Thus, with the proviso that some of us clarified those values by looking at the decadence of the West rather than of Marxism, we return to Gellner's basic purpose, which is to explain how civil society appeared, what it is, and how it relates to other options, past or present, for human social life.

Fundamental to Gellner's macro-historical view is that civil society stands in contrast to two other social forms which, until recently, were the only ones on offer. The first such form, which is the original form of all society, he calls "segmentary": these are "cousin-ridden and ritual-ridden" societies characterized by "stifling communalism." In such societies, found everywhere from the early neolithic villages through the Greek city-states to the near-contemporary Far East, individual status is internalized, given by birth or acquired by ritual. It is not voluntary, and it is certainly not pluralistic.

The second traditional form of society, which evolved later and usually wound up encompassing the former, is centralized authoritarianism; this is the form of the traditional empires of human history, from the Assyrians to the Ottomans. These despotisms add power to segmentation and are thus able to dominate large numbers of people across large areas. They do this not only by brute force but, more effectively, by developing sophisticated systems of command and administration based on literacy, accounting, and mobilization. Marxist socialism, in this perspective, was "the command-administrative manner of running an industrial society." And a command-administrative system, Gellner repeats, was not unusual, it was "the normal condition of humanity." Unstated here is the assumption that segmentary societies by themselves rarely live long, because they will typically be conquered and absorbed by the nearest command-administrative empire; an assumption richly confirmed by history.

Gellner's aperçu about the rise and fall of Marxist socialism is brilliant: nowhere else have I seen it convincingly explained, first, why it succeeded, and could only succeed, in backward countries, and second, why it failed as an ideology even among its beneficiaries. The reason it succeeded is that it promised "the rectification of injustice and inequality," which in the leading case, that of Russia, meant both "the incorporation of Russia in a prosperously materialist West" and "a morally superior transcendence of the West." The reason it failed is that by sacralizing the economic and the profane, Marxism left no escape when enthusiasm waned and the economy stagnated. "When the *nomenklatura* switched from shooting each other to bribing each other, faith evaporated." And because that faith was secular, its failure in concrete reality was fatal. With the mobilizing unity of faith, truth, and order gone, the political and social elite of Communist societies fragmented into the nationalisms and the incipient civil societies we see today.

Conditions of Liberty, then, offers a précis of Gellner's macro-historical vision and an account of why the West is unique and how it became so. This is humanistic political sociology of the highest order: learning useful for understanding the world.

What of the question I raised earlier, about the prospects for civil society in the West? As we have seen, Gellner is sanguine mainly because he marvels at civil society's rebirth in

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the East, and because he himself likes it. The only reason civil society might fail, in his view, is if economic growth stops permanently, because then "anyone's gain is balanced by someone else's loss" and society may well "revert to the condition that has characterized most societies, and complex ones most of all—a hierarchical system in which status is deeply internalized."

Arguably, other dangers are more imminent. Gellner believes that "there are sometimes individuals or even entire sub-communities which are deeply cynical concerning the wider society, but this is relatively rare," because "we *like* to accept the universe." Looking at contemporary America, one wonders. In total contrast to Gellner's "modular man" who builds and enjoys civil society, many Americans blame society, not themselves, for their malaise. A prevalent analysis of this malaise is that it stems from a loss of "moral capital," of the social certainties of an earlier age. Gellner will have no truck with this theory: "I do not accept that secularized or semi-secularized society simply lives morally on a kind of inherited moral capital, left over from the age of faith. In fact, it lives on a certain ambiguity."

Civil society requires a tough-mindedness that seems absent from current American elites. Part of this tough-mindedness is a rejection of relativism, because even if civil society is pluralistic, its way of knowledge —science—is not. "The existence of a culture-transcending truth seems to me the most important single fact about the human condition," Gellner rightly says. The continuing wager of the West is that ordinary men and women will accept and act on that ambiguity, on the necessary coexistence of skepticism and certainty that is the base of civil society.

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Notebook

Courtauld the collector

by E. V. Thaw

The admission of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art into British collections, both public and private, was a very slow process. Despite the steady drum-beating by Roger Fry and Clive Bell of the influential Bloomsbury set, great French paintings from Manet to Matisse were simply not going to England in the way that they were to Russia, to America, to Germany, and even to tiny Denmark in the years preceding the First World War.

In the United States, from before 1880, the Havemeyers, the Potter Palmers, the Whittemores, and some others on a smaller scale were buying Monets and Degas, influenced by the fact that the Durand-Ruel firm had opened in New York and had focused much of its sales effort on Americans. In Russia, the incomparable collectors Schukine and Morosov began about 1903 to collect masterworks by Picasso and Matisse, but also Van Goghs, Cézannes, and Gauguins from which the younger artists' modernist work derived. Both Russians knew Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo, who had settled in Paris in 1903. Gertrude Stein in turn greatly influenced the Cone sisters from Baltimore, who started to buy on their annual trips to Paris early in the century.

By 1921, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, still a bastion of academic conservatism (despite its having bought, in 1913, a Cézanne out of the Armory Show—the first Cézanne to be purchased by an American museum), mounted its first exhibition of Impressionist art with many loans from the Havemeyer collection.

By 1923, six years before the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, eighteen years after the Fauve show in 1905, forty-nine years after the first Impressionist exhibition, Samuel Courtauld, the industrialist and art connoisseur, offered a fund of £50,000 to purchase significant examples of the French school of modern painting for London's National Gallery. Until 1917, both Renoir and Degas were still alive. Monet lived until 1926, and, before Courtauld's efforts, the National Gallery was hampered by a long-standing policy of not buying any work by a living artist. In that period, it was the Tate's policy to collect only British artists.

Fifty thousand pounds was indeed an almost princely sum at that time; nevertheless, its purchasing power for great modern French paintings in the early 1920s now seems to us amazing. Not only did the National Gallery acquire Seurat's monumental *Une Baignade, Asnières*, but also several Van Goghs, including a great *Sunflowers* and *The Yellow Chair*, as well as major Cézannes, Monets, Pissarros, a Sisley, and a Bonnard. According to both Fry and Courtauld, the roots of modernism stem from Manet and he looms especially large in this context. The National Gallery, through the Fund, bought *The Waitress* (*La Servante de bocks*), and Samuel Courtauld, for his private collection,

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acquired the great *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, which he promptly loaned to the National Gallery. (Curiously, but happily, the Courtauld Fund also purchased Degas's early, strangely neo-classical and unmodern *Young Spartans* of 1860, earlier than any of the Manets, but eminently suitable for a National Gallery full of Old Masters.)

The story of Courtauld as patron of the National Gallery is even more stunning when one takes in his achievement in simultaneously forming his private collection, which hung in his London townhouse and was ultimately given to the University of London as part of a Courtauld Institute dedicated to the study of art history. This so-called private collection perhaps outclassed the Courtauld Fund acquisitions. Beginning with the great Manet, it included Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear*, Cézanne's *Card-Players*, Seurat's *La Poudreuse*, Renoir's *La Loge*, and several Tahitian Gauguins of the highest quality. These and many other pictures were originally also destined for the National Gallery, but, it seems, Lord Lee of Fareham, a collector of Italian primitives and a power in art circles at the time, persuaded Courtauld to change his plans in favor of the Institute (which, incidentally, now also possesses Lord Lee's fine Italian panels).

Like New York's Metropolitan Museum, which waited sixty-four years to properly celebrate Louisine Havemeyer and her fabulous enrichment of that whole museum, the Courtauld Institute has only recently celebrated the great gifts of its founder with an exhibition and accompanying book.[1] Better late than never. As with the Havemeyer collection, not everything in the Courtauld collection was given to the public. (The Havemeyer children generously added to their mother's splendid bequest, but kept many great paintings for themselves, some of which are now in Elektra Havemeyer Webb's Shelburne Museum in Vermont.) Some of Samuel Courtauld's collection was divided among the family, some of it was sold, and much of it was given to a great lady named Christabel Aberconway, who became, apparently, more than just a friend to Courtauld in his later years. Lady Aberconway's part of the division included several masterpieces, including Picasso's 1901 painting of a little child holding a pigeon, which many of us grew up knowing, as it was the cover illustration of a famous coffee-table survey of modern art published shortly after the Second World War by Albert Skira. This Picasso and quite a few more of her things have now been put by her family on long-term loan at London's National Gallery. A major Seurat marine subject, which went by marriage to R. A. Butler, a conservative M.P. and minister, has gone to the Berggruen Collection, and is also now on display in the same rooms at the National Gallery.

Much of this material was reassembled and joined with the Courtauld Institute's own holdings for the major show last summer celebrating the remarkable achievement of the donor. It was also the occasion for a renewed assessment of the lamentable galleries in which the Institute's magnificent holdings are now forced to inhabit.

For years the original Courtauld galleries, on Woburn Square at the University of London, were a favorite haunt of art lovers rather than tourists. One ascended in a huge freight elevator to a series of rooms of somewhat domestic scale, built for the very purpose of hanging these domestic-sized works. When in the late 1980s the beautiful Somerset House, designed by Sir William Chambers in the mid-eighteenth century, became available, it was restored to provide a new, grander home for the Institute and its pictures, now much more numerous due to the bequest by the reclusive Count Seilern of his incredible "Princes' Gate Collection." The Somerset House project proved a total

1 "Impressionism for England: Samuel Courtauld as Patron and Collector" was on view at the Courtauld Institute Galleries, London, from June 17 through September 25, 1994. A companion book by John House, with contributions by various others, was published by the Courtauld Institute and Yale University Press (256 pages, $50).

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disaster, which today, with a new director and a new installation plan, has improved to the stage of being merely a partial disaster.

Alas, unless violence is done to the interior architecture of Somerset House, the bulk of the Courtauld Institute collections —Lord Lee's Italian Primitives, the Impressionists, and Count Seilern's Rubens sketches and his Master of Flemalle triptych *et al.*—will never look well in rooms of those proportions, with that kind of paneling, and with hardly controllable lighting. Also, too many of the best things in all these collections are never on view; there is not enough hanging space, or any climate control. Only the full-length formal portraits by Goya, Gainsborough, Romney, and the like seem in any way at home in those spaces. *Burlington Magazine* said in a recent editorial on the subject: "Many people will remain nostalgic for the old purpose-built galleries at Woburn Square, whose top-lit rooms and undistracting architecture allowed unimpeded study of each individual painting."

A catalogue raisonné of the complete Courtauld collections, edited by the late Douglas Cooper, was published in 1954. The book by John House that accompanied the recent exhibition not only reproduces most of the pictures in good color plates but nicely covers the social and art-historical prejudices and preoccupations of Samuel Courtauld's time. Despite his relative lateness as a pioneer of modernism compared to the Russians and the Americans, Courtauld emerges here as a paragon of a patron, highly intelligent and, unlike Dr. Barnes, his contemporary rival, a genuinely nice fellow. The death of his wife, Lil, who supported music in London, or the onset of the Great Depression, or a combination of both caused him in about 1930 to slow his buying of art dramatically, although he made occasional private acquisitions until his death. He was still a rich man, and the Depression period offered many opportunities to an alert buyer, but his great gift to his own Institute in 1931 seemed to have ended his larger appetite. He died in 1947.

The entrenched hostility toward "Modern Art," even to Manet and the Impressionists, was more virulent in England, with its backward-looking Royal Academy of Art and painters like the Academy President, Sir Alfred Munnings, than it was in Russia and America, with their more bourgeois and mercantile patronage of the arts. Courtauld became a kind of missionary for his belief. It is curious that he was not knighted, nor did he accept an offered peerage; England—and the rest of the civilized world—owes him a debt which should not be forgotten. Mr. House's fine book serves the present moment as a welcome, if modest, memorial to a still sadly little-known cultural hero.

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Letters

Henry Weinfield's Mallarmé

To the Editors:

John Simon begins his discussion of my work on Mallarmé (January 1995) by calling me a hothead and a dreamer. I shall not stoop to his level by responding in kind, and I trust that the malice behind his attack will be evident to most readers; but I do feel that I ought to take up some of the specific points he raises so as not to seem to concede to his fallacious arguments and so as to allow the reader to judge between him and me.

First, Mr. Simon apparently belongs to the school of those who believe that verse-translation is impossible and should not be attempted. That is fair enough, and I myself am very well acquainted with the argument, as I indicate in my Introduction. But it all depends, of course, on what one means by translation. If one means the carrying over of every feature, tonal and otherwise, of the original, then obviously verse-translation is impossible because every language has its own semiotic system. But if one means a dialectical engagement with the original, such that something new but at the same time "faithful" is created, then not only is verse-translation eminently possible but absolutely crucial to the growth of every native poetic tradition. One could argue, for instance, that modern English poetry commences with the translations of Petrarch accomplished by Wyatt and Surrey. In any event, believing that verse-translation is impossible, Mr. Simon savages my work because it does not reproduce all of the stylistic and semantic features of the original—in other words, because it does not accomplish what he and I would both agree is impossible to accomplish and what I certainly never set out to do. Could anything be more ludicrous?

Although he is a clever rhetorician and very skillful at resorting to the usual sophist's trick of selective quotation, Mr. Simon has no ear for English poetry and absolutely no understanding of English prosody. For example, he makes some rather bizarre observations about my use of rhyme in the early poem "Apparition": "For Mallarmé's pure rhymes—*pleurs-fleurs, violes-corolles*—we get such shabby approximations as 'tears-flowers,' 'violas-corollas,' which do not even work as slant rhyme." "Tears-flowers" ("flowers" pronounced as a monosyllable, as often in English poetry) is slant rhyme (and I think in the context it works very well, but here I can only ask the reader to read the entire poem), but "violas-corollas" is pure rhyme with the penultimate and final syllables rhyming exactly. The French "viole" means "viol" in English, and one could understand a purist complaining about this on semantic grounds (I have, of course, made all sorts of semantic accommodations), but Mr. Simon's comment is, as I say, simply bizarre.

In the case of my translation of "Angoisse," the reviewer accuses me of "metrical confusion"—that is, of shifting from a tetrameter to a pentameter line. "Here we are solidly ensconced in pentameter," Mr. Simon breezily declares with respect to the second quatrain of the sonnet:

> I ask but a dull dreamless sleep from your bed,
> Swathed beneath curtains oblivious of remorse,

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Which you who know more about nothingness
than the dead
Can taste when your falsehoods have run their dark
course.

As any freshman can discern, this quatrain, like the entire sonnet, is clearly in tetrameter (essentially anapestic but with a few variations that are normal to triple meter). ("I *ask* but a *dull* dreamless *sleep* from your *bed*," etc.)

If Mr. Simon's tone were not so unpleasant, I wouldn't mind his disagreements about matters of phrasing here and there, even though most of his observations are plainly wrong. For example, he disapproves of "oblivious of remorse" in the lines quoted above, stridently insisting that the text's "inconnus du remords" should be translated "unknown to remorse"—as if that solution did not come readily to hand. The problem, however, is that it makes the *curtains* unknown to remorse rather than *remorse* unknown to the curtains, which happens to be what Mallarmé had in mind. (Mallarmé's metonymy attributes to the curtains what obviously pertains to the lyric-I.)

There are situations in which any translator will want to bring out certain features of the original poem that are only implicit in the text itself. It's all a matter of tact, and these things can never be formulated theoretically or in advance. Mr. Simon is blind (as well as deaf) to what I am attempting, and so whenever I depart in the slightest from the surface meaning, he is wont to fly into a paroxysm of rage. And because he quotes so selectively, the naïve reader could easily come to the conclusion that I am inept. For example, Mr. Simon accuses me of seriously misreading a passage in "Toast funèbre," Mallarmé's elegy on Théophile Gautier:

Afin que le matin de son repos altier,
Quand la mort ancienne est comme pour Gautier
De n'ouvrir pas les yeux sacrés et de se taire . . .

So that upon the morning of his high repose,
When the task of ancient death for Gautier is to close
His sacred eyes and keep his secrets . . .

"This utterly misses the point," declares Mr. Simon, "which is that for Gautier, who, as he said, was 'a man for whom the external world exists,' not to see and speak was a particularly horrible deprivation." I'm afraid that Mr. Simon utterly misses the point—indeed, that he hasn't got a clue as to what is going on in these lines. Consider the second of the three lines quoted in the original: "Quand la mort ancienne est comme pour Gautier." Literally, this means: "When ancient death is as for Gautier"—which in itself is gibberish. But in the context of the previous line and of the poem as a whole, it is clear that Mallarmé means that Gautier in death has taken on the lineaments and the dignity of ancient death. "Task," I submit, is absolutely precise here, though it corresponds to a conception that is only implicit and hence open to interpretation in the original. Again, I can only invite the reader to judge between Mr. Simon and myself by reading both the translation in its entirety and (because this is such a difficult poem) my commentary.

Mallarmé was a great experimenter, and he was continually excoriated by the mediocrities and Simple Simons of his time for departing from this or that calcified convention. Obviously, translation (like poetry itself) is nothing if not experimentation. Yet whenever he sees the slightest traces of experimentation in my translation, Mr. Simon goes ballistic. In my translation of "Une dentelle s'abolit" I broke some of the words at the syllable in order to capture a certain rhythmic emphasis:

Lace sweeps itself aside
In the doubt of the ultimate Game
Only to expose profane-
ly
eternal absence of bed.

This white and undivid-
ed
garland's struggle with the same
Blown against the ghostly pane
Floats more than it would hide.

The penultimate syllable of "undivided" catches the rhyme on "aside," and the final syllable catches that on "bed"; then we have "Game"/ "same" and "profane"/ "pane." To my own ear, the syllable breaks produce an interesting syn-

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copation. Let the reader decide for himself; but in any event, to fulminate, as Mr. Simon does, about "visual and rhythmic aberrations" is just plain silly. Incidentally, with respect to this poem, Mr. Simon chides me for writing "core's" instead of "core is" in the sestet. Mallarmé, he admonishes, "would never write, in English, 'core's' for 'core is.'" I quite agree—but Mr. Simon has apparently not understood that "core's" is a genitive not an abbreviation in the line ("Au creux néant musicien"—"In the hollow core's musician"), which means that he hasn't understood the entire poem. Another indication that whatever the state of his French, Mr. Simon's English leaves something to be desired.

Why go on? This splenetic and incompetent reviewer has the indecency to refer to me as a "self-styled poet" (no doubt because the jacket-cover of my book indicates that I have published a number of collecitons of poetry; in contrast to the self-aggrandizing Mr. Simon, who cites his own doctoral thesis—finally published by Garland Press in 1987, we are told—I make no claims for myself or for my poetry in the Introduction). Quoting my assertion in the Introduction that Mallarmé "remains a religious poet even though he loses his belief," an assertion which is unexceptional in itself and with which many if not most commentators would agree, Mr. Simon observes, with his usual insinuating snideness, that this is "a statement befitting one who teaches at a Catholic university." I teach at the University of Notre Dame, and for this I make no apology whatever; but I happen to be Jewish. Having read a few specimens of Mr. Simon's prose on earlier occasions, I must say that I am not at all surprised at his rudeness; but I am surprised that *The New Criterion* would have opened up its pages to writing of this kind.

Henry Weinfield
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Ind.

John Simon replies:

Mr. Weinfield starts out in a snit because I called him a dreamer and a hothead. To me, those are terms of endearment: Shelley was that, so was Berlioz, so was Rimbaud. But he nobly declares he won't stoop to my level of malice, and contents himself with referring to me as savage, ludicrous, sophistical, tin-eared, uncomprehending, less perceptive than any freshman, blind as well as deaf, given to paroxysms of rage, not having a clue about Mallarmé's meanings, a mediocrity, a Simple Simon (how original!), calcified in convention, gone ballistic (what a way with a phrase!), plainly wrong, just plain silly, one whose English leaves something to be desired, self-aggrandizing, snide, and rude. I wonder what he would have called me if he had stooped to my level of malice.

I am delighted that Mr. Weinfield sees himself in the lineage of Wyatt and Surrey as a verse translator. I doubt whether either of them—even Wyatt with his metrical liberties—would have written anything so metrically amorphous as Mr. Weinfield's "I ask but a dull dreamless sleep from your bed,/ Swathed beneath curtains oblivious of remorse,/ Which you who know more about nothingness than the dead/ Can taste when your falsehoods have run their dark course." Strictly speaking, this mush is full of pyrrhics and spondees (precarious in English prosody), and it is only by bending over backward for Mr. Weinfield that I could call that stanza pentameter, accentuating ask, dull, dream, sleep, bed; swathed, cur, liv, of, morse; you, more, noth, than, dead; taste, false, run, dark, course. True, this is strained, not to say desperate, pentameter, but still less contorted than an attempt to scan the lines as tetrameter, which would force us into epitrites and antispasts, fine in Greek, but spastic in English. Of course, we may both be wrong, and the lines may really be prose.

Almost immediately Mr. Weinfield hauls out the stock complaint that I am quoting out of context, the last resort of lachrymose reviewees when the going gets rough, as if a reviewer could—or had to—quote an entire poem to make a simple point. Mr. Weinfield may consider "tears-flowers" an appropriate slant-rhyme rendering of *pleurs-fleurs*; I consider it a piece of nothing, about which Mr. Weinfield knows as much as the deaf. And, clearly, *violes-corolles* is all right in French, where the o-sound is identical in both words. But in English, the o in "violas" is long; in "corollas," short. Cacophony results. That Mr. Weinfield considers this pure rhyme makes me think that the tin ear is on the other foot.

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What truly gives away the show is Mr. Weinfield's plunking for—and defending—"oblivious of remorse" for "inconnus du remords" over "unknown to remorse." In the first place, wherever a good Anglo-Saxon equivalent exists, it is always preferable in an English translation to a Latinism. Further, "rideaux inconnus du remords" means literally "curtains unknown to remorse," where "unknown" is unconditional and "oblivious" only relative. It is nice for Mr. Weinfield to invoke metonymy, but there is no metonymy here. There is, however, synecdoche, with the part, "curtains," standing for the whole of cohabitation in a prostitute's bed, and finding surcease in the woman's Lethean embrace. Our translator is totally off when he says that the poet "attributes to the curtains what obviously pertains to the lyric-I." The lyric I (why the hyphen?) is the speaker, and he manifestly does *not* have the sleep he seeks (Mallarmé's famous insomnia), hoping instead to find it in an ambience where remorse and similar worries are unknown.

Mr. Weinfield complains that because I quote selectively (the missing context again!), the naïve reader could easily come to the conclusion that the translator is inept. Let me allay his fears: the naïve reader should not worry him; it is the sophisticated reader he should be concerned with. One who, for example, understands what Mallarmé is talking about in "Toast funèbre," which Mr. Weinfield, even with help from me, seems unable to do. And though I have no objection to his experimenting in his own poetry (of which none of my poet and poetry-lover friends has even heard, and about which the PEN Club could not provide information), he is not to experiment—clumsily—at the expense of Mallarmé, or of the naïve reader who could easily come to the conclusion that Mallarmé in French sounds something like Weinfield in English.

Granted, even good translators have resorted to contemporary touches; Dudley Fitts, for example, in his versions from the Greek Anthology. But the Greek epigrammatists are very far from us in spirit and diction, and can use a little judicious updating. Mallarmé, however, is one of us, if not indeed still ahead of us, and needs no such modernizing.

What I find absolutely staggering is Mr. Weinfield's claim that "core's" in his version of "Une dentelle s'abolit" is a genitive, not a contraction of "core is," proving that (a) I haven't understood the poem, and (b) I don't know English. Let me then oblige Mr. Weinfield by quoting him in context: "Sadly sleeps a mandolin,/ The hollow core's// Such that near some window, one,/ Through no belly but his own,/ Filial, might have been born." Surely, for this to make any kind of syntactical sense, it must mean that the mandolin's hollow core *is* like a pregnant belly from which one could have been born. The genitive of core can mean nothing in that context. Alas, Mr. Weinfield misunderstands the poem he is trying to translate. The French reads: "Tristement dort une mandore/ . . . Telle que vers quelque fenêtre/ Selon nul ventre que le sien/ Filial on aurait pu naître." The mandolin is such —note *telle* in the appropriate feminine—that one could have needed no other (i.e., human) gibbosity to be born from. When Mr. Weinfield translates the belly as being *his* own, rather than *her* own (the mandolin's), he kills the meaning. So I am not sure whether his claiming "core's" to be a genitive is dishonest or merely obtuse.

Finally, when I tease Mr. Weinfield about his assertion that Mallarmé remains a religious poet —despite his rejection of God and Christianity as quoted by Mr. Weinfield himself—to the effect that such a thesis befits someone teaching at a Catholic university, he responds humorlessly that though he unapologetically teaches at a Catholic school, he himself is Jewish. That is clear enough from his name, but can't one be both Jewish and zealously religious? Or indeed, all three: Jewish, religious, and mistaken about Mallarmé?

Early in his letter, Mr. Weinfield describes his method of translation as "dialectical engagement with the original." That approach may serve a philosopher, but not a translator. A translator has to be himself a poet—preferably a good one, such as Richard Wilbur, our finest verse translator—and know something about the language he is translating from. That is all. As I look again at Mr. Weinfield's renderings, I am reminded of an apothegm of the great Antoine Rivarol—social philosopher, wit, and translator of Dante: "Les poésies de François de Neufchâtel sont de la prose où des vers se sont mis." Such, regrettably, are Henry Weinfield's translations: prose into which rhymes have intruded.

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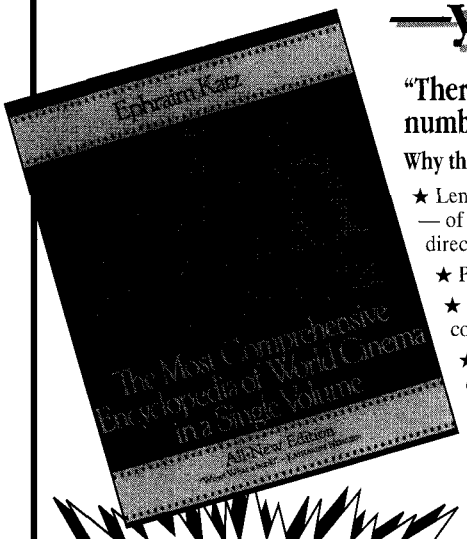

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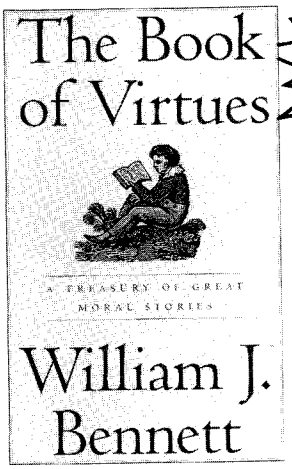

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- **W** **Upton Sinclair:** *A Pen to Change America* (40 min.)
- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
- **Y** **Paul Tillich/Adela Rogers St. Johns:** *An Interview* (60 min.)
- **Z** **Eudora Welty:** *Learning to Write Fiction* (53 min.)

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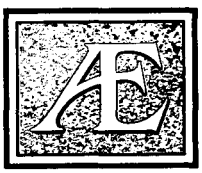

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